













THE  
COUNTESS LONDA

BY  
GUY BOOTHBY

AUTHOR OF  
"DR. NIKOLA," "THE BEAUTIFUL WHITE DEVIL,"  
"THE CURSE OF THE SNAKE," "THE MYSTERY OF THE CLASPED  
HANDS," "MY INDIAN QUEEN," "A MILLIONAIRE'S LOVE STORY,"  
ETC.

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## CHAPTER I

NICODEMUS PETTIFER, usually known as "Young Nick," I suppose to distinguish him from another person who shall be nameless, was only known to have made one joke in the whole course of his existence. That was when he said, publicly over a glass of ale, that he served John Drummond for love and not for lucre. This was certainly so, for the salary he received from that gentleman was so small, that it seemed almost an insult to give it the name at all. It must not, however, be inferred from this that his employer was in any way parsimonious, far from it; the truth was, the recipient of the wage was not worth more than he received—if, indeed, he were worth as much. It was a sad fact, but one not to be denied, that Drummond only kept him on because he was well aware that if he discharged him, no one else



would employ him, in which case the unfortunate Nicodemus would inevitably starve. He was a little sandy-haired man, between forty and fifty years of age, with bow legs and a hairless face, a mouth that was always twitching, and small eyes set deep in his head. These physical defects were, however, counterbalanced by a loyalty to his master that was almost pathetic, and a belief in the business that was scarcely warranted by results. Moreover he was the possessor of a manner that would have added a lustre to a Court Chamberlain. To see him receive such clients as honoured the office with a visit, to watch him bow them into his Chief's presence and place chairs for them, and afterwards bow them out again, was to feel that he had missed his vocation in life.

"Poor Nick," Drummond was wont to observe; "if only his brain were as perfect as his manner I should have an ideal clerk, but—" and that "but" was as significant as Lord Burleigh's nod.

But Nick's brain was unfortunately far from perfect and, in consequence, he went on his way, making wrong entries in such books as he was allowed to keep, mixing up in a manner peculiarly his own, the notice boards of the firm, so that 'houses to let' were described as to be sold and

vice versa, until his unfortunate employer was driven to the verge of despair. To expostulate, threaten, or implore, was equally futile. Poor Nick was contrition itself. He had meant to do his best, but somehow, he would declare with a heavy sigh, that best invariably turned out wrong. He feared, he very sadly feared, that Providence had not intended him for a commercial life. And there for once he made no mistake. Misfits though many of us are, there never was a more deplorable one than Nicodemus Pettifer.

John Drummond was a tall, good-looking man of three or four-and-thirty, broad shouldered, well set up, bronzed as to the cheeks, and boasting a moustache, (since it is necessary that I should go into particulars), which was the envy of the men and the admiration of the ladies who constituted what is called his social circle. What had induced him to become a House and Estate Agent, and above all, to take Nicodemus Pettifer for his clerk, is a mystery I have never been able to solve. He certainly did not care about the profession and he loathed an office life to the bottom of his being. As a boy, it had been his ambition to go to sea, but his father dying, and his mother being a delicate woman, he had been compelled to

abandon the idea and settle down ashore. Happily for him he was the possessor of a small private income, so that the strain of making a fortune out of the House and Estate Agency was not so great as it might otherwise have been—particularly in a small river town where folk are conservative and do not encourage strangers, or buy and sell properties, as freely as they are reported to do in more ambitious parts.

One hot and drowsy afternoon in summer, Mr. Nicodemus Pettifer sat in the outer office, which looked upon the Market Place, biting the end of his pen and contemplating life, or as much as he could see of it—through the wire window blind on which was set forth in gold lettering the fact that its proprietor was not only a House and Estate Agent, as already described, but that he was also a Valuer. It was not a very inspiring picture he had presented to him; a row of "unhappy calves, tied by the neck, a small flock of frightened sheep, who appeared to be anxious to run in every direction but that in which they were desired to go—an affluent farmer, who was undoubtedly drunk, and a seedy-looking individual who was with equal certainty sober. Inspired, perhaps, by what he saw there, Nick rose and crossed

the room to the mantelpiece, on which stood a small filter. With as much solemnity as if the liquor were Imperial Tokay, he poured himself out a glass of water and, having held it up to the light, drank it slowly and with evident appreciation.

—“After all,” he said to himself. “there’s nothing much better or more wholesome for a man than water, particularly when you draw it from a first-rate expensive filter like this.”

Having given utterance to this philosophic remark, he stood for upwards of a minute gazing at the article in question as if to make quite sure that he was cognisant of all its beauties. He had just replaced the tumbler, and was about to return to his desk, when the glass door was opened and the fairest vision he had ever encountered in his life entered the office. She was a woman of about twenty-eight or thirty, and so beautiful that, for a moment, even Nick forgot his usual politeness and could only stare and stare at her in speechless admiration. But as I have taken care to point out this lapse from courtesy was but momentary. In an instant he was at the counter, washing his hands, metaphorically, of course, and bowing with all the courtliness at his command. He remarked that it was a fine day, but warm in the sun. She

was quite willing, it appeared, to subscribe to this fact, whereupon he was emboldened to continue by observing that such weather might be considered seasonable at that particular season of the year. Again she was gracious enough to agree. His conversational supply being now exhausted, Nick ventured to enquire her business.

"Are you Mr. Drummond?" she asked. "I am anxious to see him personally."

Nick stated that he was not that gentleman, and bitterly regretted the fact that he was compelled to make the admission.

"Perhaps you would not mind asking him if he will see me for a few minutes," she said. "I will not detain him very long."

"It would give him the greatest possible pleasure to see you, I am sure," observed the flatterer. "Unfortunately, however, he is not within at the present moment. Business of a highly important nature has necessitated his absence for a brief period."

The girl seemed disappointed when she heard this; she was not aware, of course, that the business in question was merely the purchase of a punt, which was to be sold by public auction that

afternoon, and which Drummond had been assured would "go for an old song."

"At what time do you expect that he will return?" she asked. "I can assure you that my business is of such an important nature that I must, if possible, see him to-day."

"Madam," replied Nicodemus, "I am sure that he will do anything he can to assist you as soon as he returns, which will certainly be before five o'clock, at which hour he usually retires from business for the day. If you could make it convenient to return, and will acquaint me with your name, I will place it before him and endeavour to arrange an interview that shall be eminently satisfactory and agreeable to both parties concerned."

The girl could scarcely repress a smile—the little man's grandiloquent language and manner harmonised so strangely with his extraordinary appearance. However, she had no desire to hurt his feelings, particularly as she stood in need of his assistance.

"I will return punctually at five o'clock," she answered, taking up her parasol from the counter. "If you arrange that I shall see Mr. Drummond at that time, I shall be extremely obliged to you."

She smiled so sweetly on him, as she said this,

that the impressionable Nicodemus felt there was nothing in the wide world he would not do for her, if she were to command him. He had never heard of Herrick's effusion, "To Anthea,"—otherwise I feel sure he would have sung it for the remainder of his existence and, more likely than not, out of tune. • •

When she had left the office, Nicodemus sat himself down to consider matters. He gazed with reverence at the particular spot on the counter on which she had placed her parasol while she had talked to him, and doubtless even regarded the doormat with unusual favour for the reason that she had set her foot upon it. Many ladies had visited the office since he had first seated himself on that leather-covered stool, but never before had it been favoured as on this particular afternoon. He envied his employer the treat that awaited him on his return from the punt-buying expedition. It was an honour fit for a king, and he hoped that Drummond would appreciate it at its proper value. Then he became conscious that as usual he had made a mistake—he had asked for, but had omitted to obtain, her name. He felt that he could pound himself into a jelly for his stupidity. The wretched Nicodemus groaned in such bitterness of spirit

that a small boy, who was seated on the doorstep, eating stolen cherries, looked in and asked to be informed where the murder was being committed, and whether it was his (Nicodemus') opinion that they would "'ang the cove as was a-doin' of it?"

When the person he addressed shook his head sadly at him and told him to go away and play like a good little boy, that impudent youth threw a cherry-stone at him, with such precision that it struck him on the chin, after which he stuck out a contemptuous tongue, made a remark about a noxious rodent, that certainly had nothing in common with the situation, and disappeared in search of further plunder, leaving Nicodemus a prey to the darkest thoughts.

"No one seems to entertain a high opinion of me," he muttered, as if it were a discovery he was making for the first time. "Doubtless she also despised me, although I did my best to ingratiate myself with her."

It was not until a quarter to five that Drummond returned to his office. He had purchased the punt at a lower price even than he had expected to be called upon to pay for it and, in consequence, he was in excellent spirits with himself and the world in general. Nicodemus rose to receive him.



“Anybody called, Nick?” said the other genially. It should be here pointed out that the clerk was Nick when they were alone, Nicodemus when Drummond was annoyed, and Pettifer before clients and when they met in the streets.

“Only one, sir,” his clerk replied, nervously. “A lady, sir.”

“A lady, eh? Young, middle-aged, or old? Pretty or plain?”

“Young, sir. And, if you will pardon my saying so about a prospective client, of an extremely prepossessing appearance. I was very much struck with her beauty.”

“You were, were you? I’m afraid, Nick, you’re a sad dog. And what was the business which brought this young and prepossessing stranger to my office?”

“She would not tell me, sir,” replied the other, who felt that the evil moment was drawing near, and, in consequence, was trembling in his recreant shoes. “She gave me to understand that it was of a personal matter and concerned you alone. In other words, so to speak, she wanted your private ear.”

“Well, she’s not going to have it. Nick, my lad, this won’t do at all. I’ll have you at hand

with that big ruler of yours to protect me while she's here. I'm not going to be left alone with young and prepossessing females at my time of life."

To Nick this jocular treatment of the affair seemed almost profane, or, at least, as near to it as his idolised master could go. But it served one good purpose—it staved off the question that he had feared would long since have been asked.

"Very well," said Drummond, "if she calls again, show her in. I suppose she'll be round in the morning."

"She is coming back to-night, sir, at five o'clock. She gave me her assurance that she would be punctual. I am expecting her every moment."

Drummond retired into his own sanctum and shut the door. Though he did not know it, he was fast approaching the one great crisis of his life. At the moment, however, instead of steeling himself for the coming interview, he was chuckling over the bargain he had made that afternoon, and thinking of the pleasant days he would spend in it on the river before the season should be over. Then a thought struck him, and he went to the door which led to the outer office. Nicodemus

was tidying up his desk preparatory to leaving off work for the day.

"By the way, Nick," he said, "you didn't tell me the lady's name. What is it?"

The thunderbolt had fallen, and poor Nick felt as if his last hour had come.

"I'm afraid, sir," he faltered, "that I've been very foolish and very remiss—but I asked it and then forgot, maybe on account of her manner towards me, in a manner of speaking, to obtain it from her. I deeply regret, I assure you, my lapse of memory, but, as I've told you many a time, and oft, sir, my head's more to blame than my heart, and nobody gets crosser with myself than I do. From my youth up I've been the same, and, though I endeavour by every means in my power, such as writing on my shirt-cuff, and thinking of Market Day when I want to remember to order a chop at the butcher's, it never seems to come to anything. In this particular instance I——"

At that moment the door opened and the young lady herself stepped into the office. If she had looked lovely before, she was doubly so now. The walk, she had taken in the interval of waiting, had given her cheeks an additional colour, which harmonised exquisitely with the pale pink of her

light summer costume. John Drummond turned and looked at her, and, so complete was his astonishment, that, for a moment, he felt his lips pursing up as if he were about to whistle. He had never seen so beautiful a creature before—the value of the office furniture alone seemed to be enhanced merely by her presence. So long a time was he in making up his mind to speak to her that Nicodemus hastened forward to explain matters.

“If you will allow me to say so, sir,” he began, “this is the lady who called to see you this afternoon, and of whom I spoke to you.”

“My clerk has already told me of your visit,” said John, who had by this time recovered his wits. “I understand that you wish to see me personally. I am sorry I was not in when you called before, but, if you will accompany me into my private office now, I shall be glad to learn in what way I can be of service to you.”

“You are very kind,” she said, and followed him into the inner room, the door of which he held open for her to enter. He could detect the faint perfume of her dress and hair as she passed him, and as he placed a chair for her, he did not fail to notice the shapely little foot that peeped from beneath her dress. Most certainly he had never

met anyone like her before, and he felt almost a woman's curiosity to discover what her business with him might be.

"Now may I ask what I can have the pleasure of doing for you?" he said, when he had closed the door and had seated himself in his office chair, behind the handsome American roller desk that was the most prominent piece of furniture in the room. "Am I to understand that you are desirous of acquiring property in this vicinity? Since you have honoured me with a call, I presume you are acquainted with the nature of my profession?"

"I am well acquainted with it," she answered, prodding the carpet with the ferrule of her parasol. "That is why I am here."

"Do you wish to rent or purchase a property, or do you require land for building purpose? In either case I think it is very probable I may be able to meet your wishes. There are some excellent sites in this neighbourhood."

The girl paused for a moment before she replied.

"I am afraid you will find it somewhat more difficult to suit me than you imagine," she answered. "But before we go any further, will you permit me to make a somewhat—or perhaps you will say

a very—unusual request? Only under that condition can I do business with you.” •

Drummond was growing more and more mystified. He tried, however, not to show it.

“Allow me to ask what that stipulation is?” he said, lying back in his chair and speaking in his best professional manner. •

“It is that you will give me your promise to say nothing to anyone about my having taken the house, should we decide on one; also that, should you at any time be questioned by inquisitive people concerning me, you will refuse to admit that you have ever done anything for me, that you know anything of me, or of my whereabouts.”

She looked anxiously at him as she finished speaking, and this time he forbore to look at her. The position was certainly becoming more complicated with every minute. In all his experience he had never had such a singular request made to him. What did it mean? Who was this extraordinarily beautiful girl, who came from he did not know where, and who did not wish either her identity or her whereabouts to be discovered? Taken altogether, it looked as if there were something behind it all that was not quite what it ought to be. And yet it was impossible when one looked at

her, so he argued, to believe that there was any ill in her.

“I hope you will forgive me if I say that you are asking something of me that is very unusual,” he said at last, turning round and facing her. “I do not know that I am altogether justified in entertaining such a request.”

“And yet it is, very simple,” the girl replied. “Let me prove it to you. In the first place I ask nothing of you but, that you will procure me the description of residence I require. In the second, that, having procured me the house, you pledge yourself to do your utmost to, prevent my being worried by people who, if they recognise me, will make my life a burden to me. What I am in search of is absolute quiet and freedom. I might add that money—forgive my mentioning it, need not be considered in the matter at all. If you can find me a property such as I desire, I shall be quite willing to pay double the ordinary rent, if it is required, and in advance.”

“That is certainly a very generous offer on your part,” said Drummond, “but is it not doubtful whether I should succeed in satisfying you? From what I can gather, it seems you are likely to be difficult to please.”

"Far from it," she replied. "As a matter of fact I may say that I have almost decided on a house already. I have not been over it, but, from what I have seen of it, I have an idea it should suit me admirably. If you will give me the promise I ask of you, I will give you the address and leave the remainder of the arrangements in your hands. I am sure they could not be in better."

Once more Drummond sat silent. His common sense told him that he would be wiser to refuse to give the promise and to let this beautiful lady go about her business, and obtain the assistance she sought, elsewhere. On the other hand, that spirit of adventure which lurks in most men's hearts, and which, years before, had done its best to send him to sea, tempted him to do as she asked and to see what the upshot of this curious affair would be. He balanced one against the other, and, as usual in such cases, prudence went to the wall.

It would be interesting to know how many of the greatest men our world has known have made up their minds at the one crisis of their lives on the spur of the moment and have come to fortune through it. Someone has said that a knowledge of the value of an opportunity is the greatest gift.



that can be vouchsafed to man. In my humble opinion, to that should be added—the pluck to take advantage of the opportunity when it presents itself.

In John Drummond's case, however, I am sadly afraid he detected no opportunity, but that he was beguiled; in the first place by a pretty face, and in the second by a very decided feeling of curiosity. I may be wrong, of course, but that is the way I look at it.

"I hope you won't think me rude to take so long to decide," he said, when at last he had made up his mind, "but I am half inclined to help you, provided always that I can."

"I thought you would help me," she replied, and a smile flickered across her face like a gentle breeze playing on a field of corn.

"Why should you have thought that?" he asked, with some surprise, for he did not altogether like the tone in which she said it. It seemed to him that there was a touch of mockery in it, and I have discovered by long experience that there are very few men in this world of ours, and still fewer women, who can bear to be laughed at by members of the opposite sex.

"Because I have been watching your face," she

answered. "I saw that you were undecided whether to trust me or not; then suddenly you changed your mind. May I say that, if you do trust me, I don't think you will regret it?"

"I was not thinking of myself at all," Drummond put in hastily. "I was thinking it would give me great pleasure to help you; that is to say, if you really stand in need of it. But I do not quite realise why you should have come to me in the matter. There are very many other men to whom you might have gone, and who would probably have served you better."

"Unfortunately it is not in my power to say why I did so," she replied. "The fact, however, remains that I came, and if you will believe me, I am not, so far, inclined to regret it. However, we must not waste time paying each other compliments. May I take it that you are prepared to help me? But stay, before we go any further, will you believe me if I give you my word that in helping me there is nothing of which you need be ashamed—mark me well; *of which you need be ashamed!*"

The young man must have lost his head under the spell of her glance, for he was weak enough to reply that he believed her, and to repeat his

assertion that he would assist her by every means in his power. ‘

‘ “I don’t know how to thank you,” she said, and there was a little tremor in her voice that allowed him to see how very much in earnest she was. ‘

“By the way,” he remarked, after a short pause, “I believe I have been even more remiss than my clerk, for as yet I have not even asked your name.”

“I suppose I should have told you that at the commencement of our interview,” said she. “But it seems I forgot to do so. I am the Countess Londa; in England, however, I prefer to be known simply as Mrs. Ferrars. You see, I am trusting you implicitly.”

“And I hope to be worthy of your trust,” observed Drummond, who had a vague notion that he had heard of the Countess Londa, though he could not tell where or when.

“But now I must go,” she said. “I must get back to London.”

She took from her pocket her purse, and from it a small slip of paper, which she placed upon the table.

“That is the address of which I spoke to you.

If you will make the necessary enquiries as soon as possible, and, if you think suitable, arrange to take it for me, I shall be very grateful to you. Believe me, I am also grateful to you for your kindness this afternoon."

"I beg you will not mention it. It has been a great pleasure to me. In order that I may know where to write to you, will you give me your address in London?"

"I think for several reasons it would be better that I should not tell you that," she replied. "I will call here in two days, at this hour, to receive your report. I need not tell you that I am anxious to obtain possession without delay."

"I will attend to it first thing to-morrow morning," said Drummond. "And my report shall be ready for you when you come down on Thursday next."

She moved towards the door which he had opened for her. At the main entrance she turned and held out her hand to him. He took it, and, as he did so, an electric thrill shot through him.

"Again I thank you," she said simply. "An Englishman is always chivalrous. Good-bye."

When he returned to his office he locked up his desk, saying to himself as he did so, "I wonder"

what the end of all this is going to be. I hope I haven't made a fool of myself. Then after a pause, he added philosophically—"Well, Time will show!"

And as you will see, if you have patience to read on, Time *did* show!"

## CHAPTER II

NEXT morning Mr. John Drummond woke with a feeling that the day was destined to be an important one in the annals of his life. Strange to relate, though in the best of spirits when he had left his office on the previous evening, by the time he reached home he was in an irritable mood, a circumstance for which he found it difficult to account. His mother had received him with her usual gentle kindness, his dinner was excellent in every way, and the cigar he smoked in the garden afterwards could not have been excelled; yet he could not help a feeling of irritation. Even the recollection of his bargain in connection with the punt did not soothe him. The bright eyes of the Countess Londa looked into his continually, and, for some reason or another, they afforded him no sort of satisfaction. He knew in his own

mind that he was but a half-hearted man of business ; his conscience had repeatedly told him so, but he had never dreamt that he was really so slack, or that he could be twisted so easily round a pretty woman's fingers. This, if he had been able to see it, was where the sting lay. His common sense told him that the lady had flattered and cajoled him only to serve her own purposes, and his vanity was sadly piqued by that knowledge. In the mood he was then in, had he met the Countess, it is possible he might have terminated the whole affair, and have informed her, pretty as she was, that she must find a tool elsewhere. Unfortunately, however, when he retired to rest, somewhat earlier than was his wont, and on the excuse of a headache, it was to dream continually of his fair client. So bewitching were these dreams, that when he woke in the morning, it was to find that all his scruples of the previous evening had vanished like mist before the sun, and that he was as resolved as ever to help her to the very best of his ability. Such, you may observe, is the influence of Woman the Beautiful upon the seemingly impregnable Business Man.

He made a hearty breakfast, perused the morning paper, took a turn round his domain with his

gardener, went upstairs to kiss his mother and bid her "good-bye" (for he was in all things an affectionate and dutiful son), and then, with a gardenia in his buttonhole, set off for his office. It was a bright, fresh morning, and, as he crossed the old stone bridge and looked down on the river, sweeping along majestically on its way to the sea, he could not help thinking how delightful it would be to offer the Countess the hospitality of his punt and to see her lying upon the cushions, while he, standing in the stern, pole in hand, sent the craft easily along the glassy surface of the river. Later, they would possibly force their way in among the reeds, and, under the arching willows, lie chatting through the drowsy summer afternoon. Perhaps she would even go so far as to make him tea, and maybe she would look at him as she handed him his cup, as she had done on the previous afternoon. After that he dared not give the matter any further consideration; it was too dangerous a topic for a common-sense, commonplace, every-day business man. It behoved him rather to bestow his thoughts upon the means whereby he might become a Poor Law guardian, a Churchwarden, and possibly before he should be called to his fathers, Mayor of his native town.



Unfortunately, however, this side of the question did not strike him as it should have done. But, of course, in that I am not to blame.

HAVING crossed the bridge and descended the hill, he made his way down the High Street towards his office. He had passed but little more than half-way along that ancient thoroughfare before he chanced upon a man whom he had known for some considerable time. The gentleman in question possessed a decidedly military appearance. If the truth, however, must be confessed, he had never, so far as was known, belonged to any arm of the Service. He was tall, carried himself very upright, had grey hair and a large grey moustache, the latter ferociously waxed. He swung his cane, as he walked, in the manner of a man accustomed to the cutting off of heads, and in addition to all this, it was popularly supposed in the little town that he possessed an intimate knowledge of the inhabitants and intrigues of every capital in Europe. His name was Dexter—Augustus Pointdexter-Dexter, and it was said by those who knew him intimately that, but for some little flaw in his escutcheon, he might even have been the owner of a title. As it was, his principal occupation was watching the river from a seat on

the promenade, and frequenting the County Club where his whist, also his billiards, was admired by everyone who had the ill-luck to be opposed to him.

"My dear Drummond," he said, as he accosted our friend, "in the words of the poet, and 'pon my word I forget which of 'em it was, you look as fresh as the blushin' rose of June. What have you been doing with yourself? Have you the secret of perpetual youth?"

Drummond made some sort of excuse, and they proceeded down the street together. There were times when, it must be confessed, he liked to be seen on terms of intimacy with the man who was his companion now. But on this particular morning his enthusiasm was not quite so great as it had been on other occasions. He wanted to be alone in order to think over certain matters connected with the business of the day. He would have shaken him off had it been possible—but Dexter was not the sort of man to be denied. In some respects he was a sort of social Octopus, who, when he made up his mind to take hold, was as difficult to get rid of as his marine half-brother.

As they proceeded down the street he talked, according to his wont, on half-a-hundred different

subjects, touching airily on each, until, at last, they reached Drummond's office.

"How I envy you your business talent," said Dexter, as they stood together on the portal of that House of Gain. "Every day that dawns has some new interest for you—every night that falls sees some end accomplished."

"I don't quite know about that," John replied. "There's not much romance, so far as I can see, in the House and Estate Agency business, and, in this particular town, very little money."

"And then your clients," the other continued, "consider them. Is there no romance to be found there?"

"I'm afraid not," answered Drummond.

"My dear fellow, that is because you don't look at matters in the right light. Let me endeavour to show you how to regard it. Young Love about to wed must have a nest. They come to you, and you find it for them. It is possible that in that house they will spend the remainder of their lives, rear their children, and know the happiness that true love brings. They love their nest—who found it for them? You! The Colonist returning after many years requires a home in which to spend his remaining years. Metaphorically, you

take him by the hand and welcome him by finding him exactly the sort of estate he has dreamed of for so many years in the arid wastes of the veldt or the Australian bush. Take my word for it, that is the way you should regard your 'profession.' "

"Unfortunately for your theory," returned Drummond, "my clients do not happen to be so interesting. Yesterday I let Biggs, the butcher, a villa in Tennyson Road, and the day before an old lady from London called upon me with regard to a house in Bridge Street, and abused me like a pickpocket because it was already let. She seemed to consider it a dishonest action on my part to have allowed another agent to step in."

"But you must meet some interesting people, surely? They cannot all be of the type of Biggs the butcher, and the irascible old female from London Town. If I am not mistaken I saw a singularly attractive young lady call at your office yesterday. Surely there is an element of romance there?"

Drummond gave a little start. So Dexter was aware that the Countess had paid him a visit. He did not know why the fact should worry him,

but the idea did certainly disturb him. He turned rather hotly on the other.

"If you're so interested in the business," he said, avoiding any reference to Dexter's last remark, "why don't you go into it yourself? You would be able then to judge of its capabilities for romance!"

"No! no! my friend, I prefer to look on. It cheers me to see my friends busied with their affairs. But you have not told me about the beautiful client of yesterday. Believe me, I am vastly interested."

"I am not in the habit of discussing my clients or their business," answered Drummond, angrily. "If you want to know anything about her you had better find out for yourself."

Dexter was not in the least abashed by this snub. On the contrary, he smiled pleasantly and patted the other on the arm.

"You must forgive me," he said; "I assure you I had not the least intention of offending you. I was merely struck by a beautiful face, and, manlike, was curious to know whether we were to have the pleasure of her society in the neighbourhood. Are we?"

"That is a question I cannot answer," John

replied, briefly. "And now I must bid you good day. I have a good many things to see to this morning."

"Ah! those cares of business," said the other, with a little wave of his hand. "How they tie one down. Farewell, my friend, may the gods prosper thy dealings this day."

Then giving his hat a jaunty cock on one side of his dissipated grey head, he set off down the street towards the Club, prepared for the slaughter of such innocents as he might encounter there.

Drummond, having seen him depart, entered his office, where he found the faithful Nicodemus arranging the morning's mail on the top of his desk, with the air of a secretary laying papers of State before a Sovereign. He unlocked the desk and sat himself down to peruse his correspondence, but though he tried his best to give it his attention he found his thoughts continually branching off in another direction. He had a decidedly uneasy feeling that Dexter had intentionally waylaid him that morning with the desire of finding out all he could concerning the Countess Londa. Now, what did that mean? Did the man know anything of her, and, if so, what was it? Was it only idle curiosity that had prompted his action, or

had it a deeper meaning? He was aware that Dexter had been for many years upon the Continent of Europe and that he knew, either personally or by report, almost everyone of any degree of importance. The whole matter troubled him exceedingly, and the more so for the reason that he could not understand it. The explanation might be simple enough, he argued; on the other hand it might be that, by giving his promise so foolishly, he had run his head directly into a noose that would end by hanging him. The thought was by no means a pleasant one for a young man respectably brought up, and who had others to think of besides himself.

Then he remembered the assurance she had given him to the effect that, in helping her, he would not be doing anything of which he might in the future have reason to be ashamed. If he could trust her, the matter was settled so far as he was concerned, but the important question was—could he trust her? For some minutes he sat at his desk, holding a letter in his hand, but staring straight before him at the ink-pot, as if he hoped to obtain advice from that useful but commonplace article. Once Nicodemus opened the door and looked in upon him, but finding him so pre-

occupied, withdrew, softly closing the door behind him. At last Drummond threw down the letter with its fellows and rose to his feet.

"Well," he said, "I don't see that there's anything for it but to do what I can for her. I gave my promise and I must keep it, happen what may."

HAVING come to this conclusion, he unlocked one of the drawers of the desk and took from it the slip of paper on which the Countess had written the address of the house of which she was anxious to obtain possession. It rejoiced in the unromantic name of The Cedars, and was situated in the Wellesley Road, a thoroughfare which he knew to be on the outskirts of the town. Having done this, he rang his bell and bade Nicodemus bring him the directory. He then turned to the page he wanted and ran his eye down the column. Yes, there it was, almost at the bottom—Mortimer, J., The Cedars. Moreover it was the last house on the south side of the road. He should therefore experience no difficulty in finding it.

"Call me a cab, Nick," he said; "and tell anyone who may call that I shall not be back until twelve o'clock. Be sure you write it down lest you should forget."



"Very good, sir," said Nick, and departed on his errand with an importance that would have befitted the calling of the Royal chariot.

"I wonder whether Mr. Mortimer will be inclined to let," said John to himself, as he put on his hat. "I feel sure the house has not been placed in my hands. However, I'll make certain."

He accordingly passed into his outer office and examined the books in which were entered particulars of all the properties entrusted to him either for letting or for sale. The house in question, however, was not upon the list in either.

"Never mind," he continued to himself, "I can but try him, and, with an offer of double the rent to tempt him, it will be strange if I can't get him to give it at least serious consideration. At any rate, I'll do my best."

When Nicodemus returned with the cab, he entered it and bade the man drive him to Wellesley Road. For once the horse was a good one and in something like a quarter of an hour he had reached his destination. If I were given my choice of places in which to reside I should certainly not choose the Wellesley Road. In the first place the road itself could scarcely be

equalled for dullness. The houses are large, old-fashioned, ugly to a degree, and stand well back from the road in gardens, shut in by cypresses and other *Coniferae*. Not a soul was to be seen from one end to the other, and even the ubiquitous tradesman appeared to give it a wide berth.

At last, after driving for upwards of half-a-mile, they reached the house of which they were in search. It was then that he understood the reason why the Countess had set her heart upon it. It was surrounded by a high wall, above which only the roof of the building could be seen. Facing the road was a large and solid wooden gate, which appeared not to have been opened for many years; beside it was another, to which the same description might very well have been applied.

Bidding the cabman wait, Drummond descended and approached the smaller door. He pressed the latch and pushed, but it would not open, obviously it was necessary to ring the bell, and this he promptly did. After waiting for some minutes, and as it was not opened, he rang once more. Again he waited; presently, however, the sound of footsteps on the other side rewarded him for his

patience. A key was turned in a lock and then the door swung inwards, and he found himself standing face to face with a tall, severe-looking man, dressed as a butler. His features remain in Drummond's memory to this day, by reason of the extraordinary blackness of his hair and beard. He has since informed me, that to compare it to any other black hair he has ever seen would be to liken the stroke of an ordinary lead pencil to a piece of jet. His upper lip was shaven, and he also noticed that, contrary to custom, the man wore a heavy gold signet ring on the little finger of his left hand.

"Is Mr. Mortimer at home?" asked Drummond, as they faced each other in the gateway.

"May I ask what is your business with him?" the other enquired, in a deep bass. "Mr. Mortimer is a great invalid and seldom receives visitors or callers of any sort. Perhaps I can do what you require?"

"I am afraid not," John replied. "My name is Drummond, and I have come to see him with regard to the letting of this house."

"The letting of this house?" answered the man, incredulously. "This house is not to let."

"I am very glad to hear it," Drummond replied. "I was half afraid that someone else might have stepped in and have secured it before me. Now, will you be so good as to take my card to your master, and to ask him to favour me with an interview. You may tell him, if you like, that I will not detain him any longer than I can help." •

"It will be of no use," answered the man, with a grunt; "he won't see you! I've told you already that he sees no one except the doctor and myself. You may just as well save your card and your time, to say nothing of me and my time."

"Look here, my good fellow, be reasonable," Drummond continued. "How do you know what Mr. Mortimer may or may not do? This is my business, and I've come to see him with an offer such as he may never receive again, and, if he has any idea at all of letting this house——"

"Which I know very well he has not! So you can make your mind easy on that."

"He'll scarcely thank you for your interference," John continued, "and for enabling him to lose the opportunity."

The man paused to consider this side of the question. It had never struck him in that light

before. He was evidently one of those obstinate, dogged family servants who, while being as honest as the day, can also, on occasion, be as exasperating as the most dishonest of their class. Having given the matter deliberate thought—he found he had made up his mind.

“Very well,” he said; but you may be sure with evident reluctance. “If you’ll give me your card I’ll take it in to him. Will you be pleased to step inside? My orders are, never to leave the gate unlocked. This is a lonely neighbourhood, and Mr. Mortimer is a timorous old gentleman. That’s why we have wires and spring guns set all round the grounds.”

He vouchsafed this information as if he deemed it quite possible that Drummond would attempt a burglary at some future date, and that it would be as well to warn him in time.

“Never mind your wires and spring guns,” remarked that gentleman, with exasperating coolness. “What I want is to see Mr. Mortimer and with as little delay as possible. We have wasted enough time already talking.”

The man offered no further remark, and Drummond followed him up the short drive to the house,

which, he came to the conclusion, was the dreariest of all the residences he had so far seen in all that dreary road. Arriving at the front door, the butler invited him to remain there until he had ascertained his master's pleasure. Then he went inside, and to add to the insult, partially closed the door.

When he had departed on his errand, Drummond pushed it open. It was then possible for him to obtain a glimpse of the hall. It was old-fashioned to a degree, and he wondered what the beautiful Countess would say to it when she should see it. A heavy oak table furnished the left wall, balanced on the right by an equally heavy oak hat-rack. A bust, he could not tell of whom, on a marble pedestal, stood next to a fireplace of dark marble, and perhaps half-a-dozen family portraits covered (one could scarcely say decorated) the walls. The floor was covered with linoleum to imitate a black and white tessellated pavement, and it may be added that the imitation was of a decidedly inferior description. There were two doors on the right and the same number on the left, also a narrow staircase ascended from the rear of the hall. Taken altogether, Drummond did not know that in all his experience of houses he had

ever met with such a dreary or disagreeable place.

After a few minutes of waiting, the butler returned and invited him to enter. From the way in which he spoke, it was evident that he had concluded that his first judgment had not been an altogether sound one. Drummond noticed this, and resolved, if occasion should arise, to profit by it. Faithful servants, he argued, were all very well in their way, but it was possible to have too much of them.

From the hall he followed his conductor down a long and badly-lighted passage, to the right, until they reached a door at the further end. Here the man stopped and rapped upon the panel. A feeble voice from within called out "Come in," and they accordingly entered. It struck Drummond as being superfluous that the butler should have said "a gentleman to see you, sir!"

Three steps took him into a room such as he had never seen before. Mr. Mortimer was an entomologist, and the entire apartment was lined with cases of specimens from floor to ceiling. It was a collection such as would have driven most collectors to despair, and its value must have

reached several hundred pounds. In the centre of the room was a writing-table, littered with papers; the floor was covered ankle deep with cuttings of the same material; the grate was full to overflowing, while the very walls had been called into requisition to fulfil the function of scrap-books. Such a litter John Drummond had never, in his life, seen before. He scarcely knew what to make of it, it was so extraordinary.

At the moment of Drummond's entry, Mr. Mortimer was kneeling on the floor at the further end of the room, evidently hunting for some paper which had been lost in the general untidiness. On hearing the door open, he looked up and stared at Drummond as if he were the last person he had expected to see.

If the butler had presented a curious appearance, the master more than equalled him. He was very tall, very old, and cadaverous to a degree. His face was as hairless as was the top of his head; his nose resembled the beak of a hawk more than anything else; his cheeks were sunken, while his eyes seemed to have lost all sign of life. He wore a rusty velvet skull-cap, and a black frock coat that, from its cut, might have been made for



him in the early seventies. A black silk stock encircled his throat, and a threadbare pair of trousers encased his legs.

"I understand from my servant that you wish to see me," he said, as he scrambled to his feet. "It is not my custom to see anyone, but I have made an exception in your favour. You can go, Perkins. I am quite strong enough to see this gentleman."

"You're sure of that, sir?" replied the man, in a tone that indicated some doubt. "Remember, last time it was too much for you."

"I am stronger now—much stronger. Why do you worry me?" his master answered, irritably. "Should I need you, I will ring. Keep within hearing of the bell."

The man gave a snort of dissatisfaction and withdrew, whereupon his master invited Drummond to take a chair. The young man did so with a feeling that the whole thing was a dream, from which he would presently awaken. The stuffy room, this strange old man, the collections on the walls, even his truculent friend the butler might very well have been creations of his fancy.

"And now, sir," said the old gentleman, who had

seated himself at his table, and was toying with a paper-knife, "perhaps you will be good enough to tell me your business with me." I have yet to learn it."

## CHAPTER III

WHEN Mr Mortimer invited John Drummond to inform him as to the reason which had brought him to see him, the latter realised in a flash how futile that visit was likely to prove. It was useless to expect that a man of such a nature would vacate his house, disturb his collections, and disorganise his domestic life, merely for the sake of a few pounds sterling. However, it behoved him to do his utmost for his client, so he put the best face he could on the matter and prepared to commence operations.

"I have come to see you, sir," he said, but not without some trepidation, "on behalf of a lady who is anxious to rent your house, if you are inclined to let it."

"To rent my house?" cried the old gentleman with evident alarm. "Is this a jest? If so, I

will not be trifled with. Rest assured of that. I am not so old but that I can resent an insult."

"I have not the least wish to insult you, believe me," Drummond replied. "I have a *bona fide* client who, for some reason of her own, has taken a fancy to this house and will rent it from you, if you care to let her have it, for a term. I might add that she is prepared to treat liberally with you in the matter."

"That will make no sort of difference to me," he answered. "If your client were as rich as Croesus I should treat the matter just as I am doing now. Why should I leave my house? Tell me that! I am not bound to, I suppose? There is no law to that effect, eh?"

Drummond, by this time, had come to the conclusion that the old man was, if not exactly mad, at least wanting in some of his wits. He therefore endeavoured to propitiate him as far as possible.

"My dear sir," he said, speaking very quietly, "I hope you will not think that I am trying in any way to force this upon you. I could not do so even if I would. All I am anxious to ascertain is whether you would care to let the house, if only for a time, say, for six months or a year. Should you do so I feel sure you will not regret

it. You have a splendid collection of butterflies and beetles—why not take a holiday and improve it? Since you are letting your house it will cost you nothing, or next to nothing, and when you return you will have the pleasure of adding to it, what you have obtained in your travels.”

“I did not think of that,” the old man replied, as if the matter had been placed before him in a new light. “But there is the collection to be thought of. What could I do with that? You say your client is a lady. She would fill the house with visitors, and they would have no respect for my cases.”

“On the contrary,” Drummond hastened to say, “my client is a lady who dislikes visitors; she is anxious to take your house because she hopes she may be quiet, and that people will not call upon her. Your collections will be as safe in her charge as in your own.”

The old man sniffed scornfully, as if he deemed it impossible that any woman could realise the value of his treasures. There is no one so arbitrary, so difficult to please, or so suspicious, as your true collector. He regards the whole world as a possible rival.

“I doubt it very much,” growled Mr. Mortimer,

shaking his head. "They promise all sorts of fine things and they don't keep them. I'm not a baby, sir; I know what I'm talking about. There never was a woman yet who knew anything of the science of entomology."

Drummond did not feel inclined to argue this point. To him it seemed irrelevant; it was also running up his cab fare. What could he do to bring the old man to the sticking point?

While he was debating this problem, Mr. Mortimer had risen from his seat and had begun to pace the room, his hands clasped behind his back. His grey hair streamed from below his skull-cap, while his head hung forward as if he were searching for something upon the floor. Altogether, he presented the strangest figure Drummond had ever seen, and as he watched him, he became conscious that, had Dexter been present, the first thing he would have said would have been, "in this case the House and Estate Agency business is full of romance."

"Well, sir, what am I to understand?" asked Drummond at last. "Will you entertain the idea of letting your house? As my client is in a hurry, it is necessary that I should know your intentions, in order that I may communicate with her."

The old gentleman stopped in his walk and looked at him, with his head on one side, very much as a thrush listens for worms on a lawn.

"How long will she require it for?" he asked. "I could not possibly let it for a long period."

"She will take it for a year," Drummond replied. "Will that suit you?"

"If I let it at all, that will suit me admirably," said the old man, and then added with caution. "But I don't know that I *shall* let it at all. I have lived here for years, and Doctor Foster says that it suits me. I might die elsewhere. Then what would become of my collections? They might be scattered to the winds and no one would care a halfpenny."

Drummond might have argued that this would not matter to him in any case, but he held his tongue. Then the door opened and the butler Perkins entered the room.

"You've been talking long enough," he said, addressing his master. "I know what it means. To-morrow you'll be in bed and the Doctor will be looking after you. I told you what it would be."

As he said this he glanced <sup>at</sup> vindictively at Drummond, as if he were resolved to hold him

responsible for anything that might occur. The latter rose from his chair.

"Well, Mr Mortimer," he said; "what shall we say? Am I to tell my client that you are willing to let or not?"

"I must have time to consider the matter," the other replied, querulously. "You must not force me to a decision at once. I am not accustomed to make up my mind at a moment's notice. I am too old and my health is by no means what it once was."

Drummond began to fear that it would be impossible to bring him to the sticking point. The old man seemed to be on the verge of his second childhood.

"In that case, when do you think it will be possible for you to decide?" said the House and Estate Agent in despair. "Could you let me have an answer to-morrow morning?"

"Yes, I think I may promise you that," Mr. Mortimer replied. "Perkins shall bring you my decision by eleven o'clock to-morrow morning. Will that suit your convenience?"

"Admirably," answered Drummond. "And now I will wish you good morning."

"Good morning, Perkins, show Mr. Drummond



out; be sure to close the gate, and then return to me."

The austere Perkins conducted Drummond to the portal in question, held it open for him to go out, and, when he had shut it, locked it securely after him.

"Well, of all the queer interviews I've ever had I think this has been the strangest," the young man said to himself, as he once more took his seat in the cab. "I shouldn't care to put much faith in Mr. Mortimer's sanity. I'm beginning to think that, after all, Dexter was right when he said there was an element of romance even in the House and Estate Agency business. I've certainly discovered two extraordinary clients!"

Then an idea occurred to him.

"I've a very good mind to try it," he said to himself. "It couldn't do any harm, and Foster and I are such old friends, that he'd tell me what he wouldn't tell a good many other people."

At the corner of Westborough Street he bade his cabman stop, and alighted. Having paid the man, he walked along the pavement until he reached the residence of the leading doctor in the town. The elderly maid-servant, who had been with her master ever since he had commenced

practice, opened the door to him with a smile. There were few people who had not a smile for honest John Drummond, with his open, good-humoured countenance and hearty manner.

"Is the Doctor at home, Mary?" he enquired.

"He's just this moment come in, sir," the woman replied. "I wonder you didn't see him. Will you please to step in. There's no one waiting for him."

John followed her across the handsome hall towards the curtain-covered door that marked the room in which the genial medico received those who came to consult him.

"Mr. Drummond to see you, sir," said Mary, holding open the door for John to enter.

The latter did so, to find his friend reading some professional work, by the open window. He rose on seeing his visitor and came forward with outstretched hand.

"My dear fellow, I am very glad to see you," he said. "What brings you to me? Don't tell me there's any need of physic, for I never saw anyone look healthier in my life. Sit yourself down and let us have a chat. I haven't seen you for ages!"

John took the large armchair by the writing-table, in which so many had sat before him to hear their fate, and prepared for conversation.

"No," he began, "I've not come to consult you professionally. As a matter of fact it's the other way round. I've come to see you on an errand which I am afraid you will consider scarcely professional."

"That's not like you," replied the Doctor, with one of his queer smiles. "What is it? Am I to heal your conscience instead of your body? That would be rather a novelty!"

"You needn't be afraid," said John, with a laugh. "In this particular instance my conscience is sound enough. No! What I want you to give me is your opinion of the mental character of one of your patients, with whom I am transacting some business. I have seen him this morning and am not quite sure that he is sound in his mind."

"Your request is certainly a trifle unusual," the Doctor replied. "But I presume, if I give my opinion, it will be considered as being in confidence?"

"I will give you my promise to that effect," returned the other. "Whatever you may tell me shall go no further. I only wanted to be guided in a transaction of some little delicacy. A client is anxious to rent his house, and the old fellow seems half inclined to let it. Unfortunately, how-

ever, I can get nothing definite from him. He meanders on about butterflies and beetles, and seems to be completely under the thumb of his butler."

"From the way in which you put it, the case certainly does not sound promising. May I enquire the name of this erratic old gentleman?"

"His name is Mortimer," said John Drummond. "He lives at The Cedars, in the Wellesley Road—the most dismal house I have ever known."

"Mortimer—Mortimer," repeated the Doctor, scratching his chin meditatively. "For the moment I cannot recall the name. Let me look at my book."

He went to his writing-table and took up a notebook, the pages of which he turned quickly. After some little time he put it down and shook his head.

"I am afraid there must be some mistake somewhere," he remarked. "I have no one of the name of Mortimer on my list of patients. He must have given you the name of some other doctor."

"No! I'll swear he did not," Drummond retorted quickly. "I am as sure that he mentioned your name as I am of anything. He declared that Doctor Foster had said the house was a good

one for him and that he might die elsewhere."

"If he used my name in that way he certainly did it without authority from me," said Foster. I think, in fact I am quite sure, that I have never attended a case in the Wellesley Road. I am afraid your friend, Mr. Mortimer, must be, as you say, a little on the wrong side of the line of sanity."

"But what on earth could his reason have been for deceiving me in such a way? He might have referred to his doctor, without mentioning any name, and I should never have thought anything about it. But the man explicitly mentioned your name. If he had not I should scarcely have come to worry you this morning."

"It's a riddle that I am afraid I cannot solve," said the other. "I should certainly be careful in my dealings with him."

"You may depend I shall," Drummond replied, and then rising, held out his hand. "Now I must wish you good-bye. Next time we meet I shall be able to tell you whether the case has any more remarkable developments."

"I hope for your sake the report will be in the negative," said the Doctor.

When Drummond found himself in the street once more, he turned his steps offwards, and,

as he paced along, tried to arrive at some understanding of the position. A feeling of vague bewilderment was creeping over him. The mysterious advent of the Countess, her extraordinary proposal to him, the grim house in the Wellesley Road, Mr. Perkins, the butler, and, perhaps, stranger than all, the owner of the house himself. Why had he declared himself to be a patient of the Doctor's? The whole thing seemed to be one gigantic jumble, of which he could make neither head nor tail.

Such was his impatience, that when he reached his office, he reprimanded the unfortunate Nicodemus for idling, and also for neglecting to inform him that there were no important letters by the midday mail. Nicodemus went back to his desk, feeling that life was but a miserable dream, and that the sooner he was translated to another sphere, the better it would be for all parties concerned.

"I must confess," said John Drummond to himself, with a seriousness that was by no means usual to him, "that I do not like the look of matters at all. It seems to me that if anyone is to suffer I shall be that one!"

Drummond went away to lunch, and the fact that his mother had received some pamphlets, con-

cerning a new religion, the tenets of which were necessarily "strange," was not sufficient to restore his equilibrium. He was still thinking of the individual who owned The Cedars in the Wellesley Road, and of whom Doctor Foster, the man who was supposed to be acquainted with everybody, knew nothing.

For the rest of the afternoon he was occupied with matters of minor importance. Later, he went to the Club and played a game of billiards, at which he was hopelessly beaten. Possibly he might have been more successful had not a pair of blue eyes been always before him, turning, by some extraordinary fascination of their own, the white into red, and the red into white, every time he determined on a shot. The veriest tyro would admit that it was playing billiards under difficulties. At last he gave it up and went back to his house, once more to dream of the Countess, and to awake with the knowledge that before many hours had passed he should see her again.

He had not been seated in his office chair more than half-an-hour, next morning, when Nicodemus entered and informed him that "a certain Mr Perkins" desired to see him. Drummond bade him show him in, and a few seconds later that per-

sonage made his appearance. If he had looked austere on the previous day, he seemed even more so now. He was dressed with scrupulous neatness in black, and carried a silk hat of superlative shininess in his hand. Drummond bade him "good morning," to which the other replied with a civility he had scarcely shown at their first meeting. He then produced from his pocket a letter, which he handed to Drummond, as if it were an order for his immediate committal to the Tower. On examination it did not prove to be a very lengthy epistle. So far as the Countess was concerned, however, it was eminently satisfactory. Mr. Mortimer had, after all, made up his mind to let and even went so far as to name the rent he was willing to accept. Even there his eccentricity did not cease, for the sum he asked was much below what Drummond had expected it would be.

"Whatever else he may be," said the latter to himself, as he laid the letter on his table, "the old gentleman's not much of a man of business. However, that's no concern of mine."

"I see Mr. Mortimer is prepared to let his house after all," he continued, aloud, looking up at the man before him.



"So he gave me to understand, sir," the other replied. "I cannot say that I am glad he has come to such a decision. He will not be the same gentleman anywhere else. What's more, I know for certain that he'll be for ever fretting about his collections, and that can't be expected to do him any good."

As Drummond had no desire to argue this point, he held his peace. If he could obtain the house for the Countess, Mr. Mortimer's collections were no sort of concern of his.

"I understand from this letter," he said, "that Mr. Mortimer is prepared to give up possession at an early date? Can you give me any idea when that would be?"

"As soon as you wish, sir," the man replied. "I was instructed to inform you that the inventory can be taken at any time after to-day. My master, having once made up his mind to let, is anxious to get away as soon as possible. He told me to say that he would be obliged if you would let him know when the lady—I should say the new tenant, would be likely to come in?"

Drummond promised to advise Mr. Mortimer on

this point, and then Perkins withdrew. When he had gone John made an entry in his diary of all that had occurred. For some reason he was scarcely more satisfied with the position of affairs than he had been before. He felt sure that the man who had just left him knew more than he pretended. There was something about his manner that gave him cause for uneasiness, and yet he could not for the life of him say why. He went over it in his mind half a hundred times, but with no better result.

His misgivings were destined to be increased rather than diminished later in the day. As a rule he lunched at home, but, on this particular occasion, he did not do so. The superstitious would say that it was Fate again.

"Should I be wanted I shall be at the Club," he said to Nicodemus, as he passed through the office, and his faithful henchman hastened to make a note of the fact, fearful lest his treacherous memory should play him false again.

On leaving the office, Drummond made his way in the direction of the County Club. He had, however, scarcely proceeded half-way thither when he remembered that a correspondent had written

to him that morning to enquire whether a certain house in an adjoining street was still vacant. He determined to ascertain this fact before lunch, and accordingly changed his course for the thoroughfare in question. When he reached it, it was to discover a furniture van disgorging its contents at the dwelling. The pavement was littered with straw and paper, while an elderly lady, of severe countenance, was engaged in fierce altercation with the leader of the men, who, on his side, was evidently in an advanced state of intoxication. The work of moving is usually productive of a seemingly unquenchable thirst.

"That disposes of that house," John muttered. "My client must look elsewhere."

Then crossing the road, he turned into a narrow lane, which he knew would bring him out within a stone's throw of the Club. On either side were high walls, while trees stretched their branches overhead, giving a pleasant shade and making the path cool, even on the hottest day. At night it was a favourite rendezvous for the amorous youths and maidens of the vicinity—who flirted and jested there, as doubtless their fathers and mothers had done before them.

He had proceeded nearly half-way down the lane when he became aware of the figures of two men who were approaching him. They were walking slowly, and it was plain that their conversation had a very considerable interest for them. As soon as Drummond saw them he gave a start of surprise. He could scarcely believe that he saw aright. The shorter of the twain was none other than the man Dexter, who had spoken to him on the previous morning concerning the Countess, while his companion was Mr. Mortimer's austere butler, Perkins. What did it mean? What connection had the two men? Why were they walking together?

Gradually they drew closer to each other, but so absorbed were they in their talk, that it was not until only a few yards separated them that they became aware of Drummond's presence. Dexter was the first to see him, and John noticed that, as he did so, a look of consternation appeared upon his face. To retreat he realised was impossible; he accordingly turned to his companion and said something to him, whereupon Perkins lifted his hat politely and said in a loud voice, "I will ask my master to write you upon the subject,

sir." Then, raising his hat again to Drummond, he passed him and went on his way.

"Now," said John Drummond to himself, as he approached Mr. Dexter, "I fancy there's going to be a tug of war!"

## CHAPTER. IV.

IF Mr. Dexter was surprised at meeting Drummond, he certainly concealed it very well. He greeted him with the utmost cordiality and with all his customary flippancy.

"The Idle Apprentice salutes the Man of Business," he said, and turned to walk back with him.

"I was not aware that you knew Mr. Mortimer," said Drummond, when they had walked a few yards.

"And you were quite right," the other returned. "I have never had the pleasure of meeting that gentleman, but I have the honour of being acquainted with that worthy individual, his butler, Mr. Perkins. He served a connection of mine for many years prior to taking his present place."

Whether this were true or not, Drummond had

no means of discovering, but he distrusted Dexter on principle, and was quite prepared to believe the worst of him. Taken in conjunction with what he had said concerning the Countess, and his anxiety to learn her whereabouts, it certainly did seem suspicious to meet him in that quiet lane with the butler of the man whose house she was about to take. However, he had no desire to allow Dexter to see that he suspected him of any duplicity. They accordingly strolled along towards the Club together, chatting as they went, as amicably as if they were the best of friends. No further mention was made during the walk of either Mr. Mortimer or the Countess. When he had finished his meal, Drummond smoked a cigar, and then returned to his office. The time was drawing near now for the Countess to make her second appearance.

"Nicodemus," said Drummond, as he passed through the outer office, "just come into my room for a moment. I have something I want to say to you." \*

The gentleman he addressed obeyed the order with alacrity. He followed his master into the sanctum and closed the door in a manner that suggested the belief that he was about to be told some important State secret. With all his other

failings, there never was a clerk with such a manner as Nicodemus.

"Now, look here, Nick," said his employer, "I am going to trust you with a delicate little piece of business, and I want you to see if you can carry it out without anyone being aware of the fact."

The face of Nicodemus instantly became as grave as that of the Sphinx. To be entrusted with delicate business did not often happen to him.

"You may safely rely upon my doing my best, sir," he answered. Then an after-thought of some importance struck him, and he added, "perhaps it would not be troubling you too much, sir, to tell me what it is you are desirous of my accomplishing."

"I will tell you," said his master. "You are familiar with the countenance of Mr Dexter, are you not? You would know him if you saw him?"

"I should know him if I met him in the largest crowd, sir," Nicodemus replied, promptly. "If you will allow me to say so, his is a face which, once seen, would not be easily forgotten."

"Very well, then. What I want you to do is this. I am expecting the lady who called here



the day before yesterday to return this afternoon. In fact, she should be here very soon. You know the particular lady to whom I refer?"

He spoke as if he were in the habit of entertaining hundreds of fair clients in the course of the day, and that it would be difficult to distinguish between them.

"I presume that you mean the singularly attractive lady whose name I regret to say I omitted to obtain when she called," returned the henchman.

"If you go on like this, Nick, you'll develop into a genius," said the other. "I refer to that particular lady, and this is what I wish you to do. When she calls here, I want you to waste no time, but to put on your hat and walk quietly out of the office and up the Market Place. Keep your eyes open and see if you can discover any signs of Mr. Dexter. Don't appear to be looking for him, and, when you come back, keep whatever news you may have for my private ear. On second thoughts, don't come back till the lady has gone. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, sir, and I will do my best to carry out your instructions in a manner such as will give you satisfaction."

"That will do. You can go now."

Nicodemus returned to the office, where he re-seated himself on his high stool, after which he glared out of the window with such ferocity that, had Mr. Dexter been on the other side, the shaft of his glance must most certainly have pierced him through and through. Drummond went back to his room, and sat himself down to await the coming of his fair client. A quarter of an hour went by and still she did not put in an appearance. At last, when she was half-an-hour late, he began to grow irritable. An uneasy suspicion that she might not come at all, and that the whole affair was a swindle, or at least a hoax, obtruded itself upon him. Yet, in that case, what could the reason be? How could it serve anybody's purpose to play him such a foolish trick? He was still turning this over in his mind when there was the rattle of wheels outside, and, on looking through the office, he saw a carriage pull up at the door. It was a neat little single-horse brougham, and was driven by a man in an unpretentious livery. Then the door opened and the Countess, looking more beautiful than ever, and even more charmingly dressed than on the previous occasion, alighted. She entered the office, and greeted the young man with a gracious smile, which swept away in an

instant all the suspicions he had ever entertained against her.

"I am afraid I am dreadfully late," she said, with charming contrition. "I have driven down from Town, and my silly coachman lost his way. I am so sorry if I have disturbed any of your arrangements. I know how punctual you business gentlemen are."

With that she gave him a glance which completed the work that the smile had begun. John hastened to assure her that her non-arrival at the appointed time had not had any ill effect upon the prosperity of his business, and then invited her to enter his own office. In the meantime Nicodemus had donned his hat and was slinking out with the air of a conspirator bent on the perpetration of some hideous crime.

When the door had closed upon them, Drummond invited the lady to be seated, and once more had reason to be aware of two of the prettiest little feet that he had ever seen in his life. He, of course, withdrew his glance at once, but she must have noticed it, for the members in question instantly disappeared from view, while a faint blush suffused her cheeks.

"What news have you for me, Mr. Drummond?" she enquired. "Good, I hope?"

"Excellent, I am glad to say," the young man replied "I don't think you could" wish for better"

"Then you have been able to procure me the house?" she cried "I am so glad That is good news indeed I feel sure I shall be very happy there It is just the sort of place I have always wanted"

"I am afraid you will find it a very gloomy residence," the other continued "It is so shut in—the rooms are very dark, and by no means furnished as I can fancy you would like them to be"

"Oh, I don't think I shall mind that," she replied "My companion and I have been all over the world and are quite used to roughing it We can make ourselves comfortable anywhere"

John Drummond pricked up his ears So she had a companion! Was that companion a man or woman, a husband or a brother?

"Does your companion hunt or shoot?" he asked "In that case I fear he will find it——"

The Countess laughed merrily, and it was as sweet a little laugh as you could wish to hear

"Oh, dear no, my companion is a girl We travel about together And now to come to prosy business May I ask what rent I have to pay and

when it will be possible for me to obtain possession?"

"You can have possession at once; that is to say, within a few days if you so desire. And the rent Mr. Mortimer is asking is £100 a year—which I think is really very reasonable for a house of that description—even furnished as it is."

She asked two or three other questions, and then took from her pocket a small purse, from which she extracted two bank notes. These she placed upon the table, remarking as she did so—"That is the rent for a year. It will save all trouble if I settle it at once."

"But won't you send it yourself direct to Mr. Mortimer—or at least wait until the agreement shall have been signed?"

"Oh, no," she answered, hastily. "I know you will do it for me. It will save me the worry of writing a formal letter. I suppose it can be arranged also that the agreement shall be signed when I take possession. Mr. Mortimer will have the security of the rent, you see."

Drummond thought that there could be no doubt the landlord would agree, and proceeded to write a receipt for the amount he had received. As he handed it to her a thought struck him.

"I think I ought to tell you," he said, "that Mr. Mortimer is a great entomologist, and he is very much concerned to know whether care will be taken of his collection during the tenancy. I hastened to assure him that I felt sure that there would be no difficulty upon that score."

"Of course every care shall be taken of it," the Countess replied. "If he would prefer it, the room in which they are might be locked and he could take the key away with him. Would that suit him?"

"I will inform him of your offer, but I don't think such a course will be necessary."

"You are very trusting," she said.

"I have seen the Countess Londa," Drummond replied, and wondered at his own gallantry.

She pretended not to notice the compliment, but turned it off by asking whether it would be possible for Mr. Mortimer to give her possession on the following Tuesday. Drummond promised to find out, and then she rose to go.

"When I have heard from Mr. Mortimer, how shall I communicate with you?" he asked. "As you may remember, when you were last here, you did not give me your address."

"I have thought of that," she said, "and I am

going to ask you to add to your kindness by inserting an advertisement in the "Agony Column" of the *Times*, addressed to "*Countess*." Do you mind?"

Singular as the request was, the other did not hesitate to accede to it. He was getting used to these little eccentricities on the lady's part, and would doubtless not have been surprised had she invited him to go out and purchase for her a pet elephant.

"Thank you very much," she said, and held out her hand to him with one of those smiles that I have described as sending an electric thrill through him. "You have been more than kind, and I am very grateful. I am afraid I have given you a lot of trouble."

"Not at all," he answered, politely. "If I can serve you in any other way, I hope you will let me know. I shall be very pleased to do so."

"I will remember that," she answered. "And now, good-bye."

He accompanied her into the other office, and was going to escort her to her carriage, when he discovered that it was not there. Upon his offering to proceed in search of it, she stopped him.

"It has only gone a little way down the street,"

she said, "and I would prefer to walk after it, as I have one or two small purchases I should like to make Good-bye again."

Then she tripped out of the office and disappeared down the street.

"Well, I must say, things are progressing admirably," said John to himself, as he returned to his own room. "A mysterious Countess, who prefers to be known by another name—who takes lonely houses and pays the rent in advance—an insane old gentleman who collects beetles and is bullied by his butler—a saturnine butler, who has meetings with a prominent citizen in a back lane—and last, but not least, John Drummond inserting cryptic advertisements in the "Agony Column" of the *Times*." Taken altogether, the collection of character has all the making of a promising melodrama. I wonder what the next incident will be?"

As he was ruminating in this way, he was leaning against his desk. Something caused him to look down. To his astonishment a visiting card lay upon the floor at his feet. It had dropped out of the purse when the Countess had paid him the rent of the house. He picked it up, hoping that it would furnish him with her address. But to his



surprise if it contained only a short sentence in French. Unfortunately his knowledge of that language was not sufficient to enable him to translate it. The handwriting, however, seemed strangely familiar to him, though he could not recall where he had met it. He slipped it into his card-case, and, as he was returning that useful article to his pocket, Nicodemus entered the office. He was not only in a state of considerable excitement, but also very much out of breath.

"Well, Nick, what did you discover?" asked his employer. "Did you see anything of the gentleman I mentioned?"

"Yes, sir, I did," panted Nicodemus, with a wild look in his eye. "When I went out he was walking up and down the other side of the Market Place."

Here it became necessary for Nicodemus to pause for breath before he could continue.

John enquired what happened then. "Hurry up, my man, I am anxious to hear all about it."

"When the lady came out, sir," the other at length continued, "she walked down the street as far as Mr. Brigg's shop, then she crossed the road and turned into Oakley Lane, where she waited."

This afforded John cause for wonderment, for the lane in question was a dismal place that would

accord but ill with the Countess' dainty costume.

"Then, sir," Nicodemus continued, "Mr. Dexter came along the street and turned into the lane too. They stood talking together for two or three minutes, and then walked on to the other end, where a carriage was waiting. Both of them got into it and it drove away. That was the last I saw of them."

"What?" John cried, almost shouting in his astonishment. "What do you mean? Mr. Dexter drove away with her? You must be mad or your eyes deceived you?"

"No, sir," the man persisted. "I am quite sure I was not mistaken. They drove away together as surely as I am standing before you now."

"Oh, very well, that will do. You can go. I must think this over."

When he was alone once more, his feelings found vent in a long whistle.

"This business promises to drive me off my head before I'm done with it," he muttered. "It's getting more and more tangled up every minute. If Dexter is on sufficiently intimate terms with her for them to go driving together, why did he try to induce me to tell him her name, and whether she was going to stay in the neighbourhood?"

Then an idea occurred to him. "By Jove," he muttered, "I shouldn't be at all surprised if this card has not something to do with it. Now I come to think of it, the writing resembles Dexter's. Bother it! Why don't I know French? I wonder who there is I could get to translate it for me?"

He threw his mind's eye over the circle of his acquaintances, but for a moment could think of no one. It's a strange thing that so few business men have any knowledge of the language of our neighbours across the Channel.

"Ah! there's Barton, the banker! He might be able to help me," he thought. "He goes to Switzerland every year, and I expect talks French like a native. I'll go and see him at once. It's after banking hours, but I have no doubt I shall find him muddling about in his garden. Nicodemus," he shouted into the outer office, "you can lock up. We've done sufficient business for to day, I think. Not one word, mind you, concerning what you saw this afternoon. Should I hear that you've been talking, I'll have you hanged, drawn, and quartered, and your remains shall decorate the classic portals of this office. Just bear that solemn fact in mind, you rascal!"

"You may be quite sure that not a word shall

pass my lips," was his clerk's reply to this direful threat. And then John left him and went off down the street to the Bank in search of Mr. Barton.

It appeared that that gentleman was where he expected to find him, namely, in his garden. At the moment of John's arrival he was taking tea with his wife and the juvenile members of his family. They were all glad to see him, particularly the youngsters, who were often his companions on the river, and looked upon him as being, next to their father, the most wonderful man in all the town.

"You're just in time to have some tea," said the banker, as they shook hands. "William, run and get another cup, and don't fall down the steps with it as you did the other day. Tommy, get out of that chair and let Mr. Drummond have it. You'll find more room for wriggling, as you have been doing for the last ten minutes, if you seat yourself upon the ground. You're not the father of a family, John, or you'd know something of my sufferings."

The genial father of the family playing with his children in the garden, was a very different person to the grim bank manager, sitting in his office, demanding the reduction of overdrafts, and refusing

the granting of loans on doubtful security. However, that has nothing to do with this story.

"I am ashamed to say that I have come to see you on a little matter that has excited my curiosity," he said. "It seems rather like prying into other people's affairs, but, as I believe it has an important bearing on a piece of business in which I am very much interested, and which is causing me a good deal of trouble, I fancy I am justified. As a matter of fact," he continued, turning to Barton, "I don't know French, but I want a sentence translated for me. You talk the language, don't you?"

"Not a word," he answered; "but the wife here does. You had better trust yourself in her hands."

"Then perhaps you will be kind enough to tell me what I want to know," he said, addressing the lady.

From his card-case he produced the little slip on which the message was written and handed it to her. She read it, and when John saw her face flush scarlet, he wondered what solecism he had committed. He began to wish he had never seen the wretched bit of pasteboard, and more still that he had not asked the lady to translate it.

"It's a pity you don't understand French," said Mrs. Barton, "for then you would have been able

to translate this for yourself and also have spared me."

"Good gracious, I hope I have not done anything very wrong," cried the young man in alarm. "I assure you that I had no intention of doing so. Please forgive me. I shall never forgive myself if I have offended you."

"It is not that," the lady replied. "My fear is that in translating it I may offend *you*. That is, of course, provided you wish me to do it correctly?"

"Oh, if it's only me who must suffer, please do not have any scruples," he hastened to say. "My shoulders are broad, and I am not afraid of punishment. What has it to say about me?"

The children were despatched to play in another part of the garden, so that they might not hear.

"Now let us have it; I assure you I am most impatient."

"It is really a very rude message," said Mrs. Barton, looking down at the card in her lap. "It runs as follows:—

"Everything is matured and I must see you without fail this afternoon. Don't say more than you need to that ass of a house agent."

"Oh, it's not so very bad, after all," said John, with a good-humoured laugh. "It's well to know

sometimes what other folk think of one. It's good for one's morals."

He replaced the card in his case as he spoke, and then finished his tea as if nothing out of the common had occurred. After that he had a romp with the boys, and later, bade them good-bye and set off on his walk home.

"Did you recognise the writing on that card?" asked Mrs. Barton of her husband, when they were alone together.

"Yes," the banker replied. "I have seen enough of it in the last two years to know it again. It's a rather singular coincidence that Drummond should have brought it in this afternoon, for just before closing time the man in question paid in a very large sum—a circumstance which has not happened since I have known him. There's something behind it all, you may be sure. However, Drummond's side of the affair does not concern us, so we need not bother ourselves about it."

It was noticeable that Mrs. Barton did not ask the writer's name. She had been trained in a good school, and, though she would like to have known, she was quite sure that her husband must have some good and sufficient reason for not divulging it.

Meanwhile John was tramping homewards, revolving the question in his mind.

"I don't mind Dexter calling me an ass in the least," he told himself. "But what I *do* mind is not being able to understand the situation. What on earth connection can Dexter have with the Countess Londa, and why is she forbidden to say too much to me? That's the rub!"

One thing appeared certain to him, and that was the fact that it was to Dexter he was indebted for the right to number the lady amongst his clients. Then there was another thing to be thought of—since he now knew that Dexter was on such friendly terms with the Countess, what was he doing with the butler, Perkins?

"I was a fool ever to have had anything to do with it," he muttered, savagely. "And as for Mr. Dexter, he had better be careful what he is about! If he tries any of his tricks on me, he will find that I can retaliate—and to some purpose."

On reaching home he went up to his room, donned a suit of flannels, and then went out into the garden in search of his mother, whom he found reclining in an easy chair under her favourite tree.

"My boy, you look worried," she said, when he had greeted her. "It is not often I see that look



upon your face. Is it anything in which I can help you?"

John shook his head.

"I am afraid not," he answered. "It is only a little business trouble, and Time will set it right."

Though he spoke so confidently, he felt that there were good grounds for supposing that Time would have just the contrary effect, if events progressed as they were doing.

## CHAPTER .V

THE night that followed the discoveries described in the last chapter was no better than the one which had preceded it, and when John Drummond left his home and set off on his usual walk to his office, he felt as if he had not closed his eyes from the time he lay down to rest. Much to his relief he did not meet Dexter on the way to town. Had he done so he might possibly have felt inclined to tell him what he thought of his conduct, which certainly would have been a foolish proceeding on his part as matters then stood. On reaching his office, he found an unusually large mail awaiting his attention. He sat down to it, but without much heart for the work. He had almost reached the last envelope when he opened one and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Well," he muttered. "Of all displays of im-

pudence I've ever heard of, this is 'the greatest."

The letter was written on Club note-paper, and ran as follows:—

Dear Drummond,

Do you feel inclined to lunch with me here to-day at one o'clock? I am off to Paris for a week or so by to-night's mail, and should like to see something of you before I go.

Yours very truly,

DEXTER (The Idle Apprentice).

"How little he guesses that I am in possession of his precious card with its candid criticism of myself—and now to ask me to lunch! Really, I am half-inclined to go, if only to find out how far he can carry his hypocrisy. Yes, I will go. But before I do so I must have my interview with Mr. Mortimer."

A quarter of an hour later he was again ringing the bell at The Cedars. The gate was opened to him by the inscrutable Perkins, who showed no sign of surprise at seeing him, but invited him to enter, as if his arrival had been expected.

"You will find Mr. Mortimer not quite himself

this morning, sir," he said, as they walked together up to the house. "At such times it is difficult to know how to take him, so I thought I'd warn you, in case you should feel inclined to take offence at his manner."

"I'm much obliged to you," Drummond answered, "but I don't think I shall trouble him very much."

He followed Perkins into the house and down the passage to the room in which he had previously interviewed the old gentleman. The butler announced him, but Mr. Mortimer, who was examining a small moth through a large microscope, took no sort of notice of him. Drummond shifted from one foot to the other impatiently, but still the old fellow did not look up. More than five minutes must have elapsed before he growled out an enquiry to the effect that he would be glad to know what his visitor meant by disturbing him.

"I have come to see you with regard to the letting of your house," John replied. "And also to know whether it would be convenient for you to give possession on Tuesday next?"

"I shall not let at all," the old gentleman snapped out. "I have changed my mind."

"But, my dear sir," expostulated John; "you

distinctly gave me your assurance that you would do so, and I have informed my client to that effect. You surely do not intend to break faith with her at the last moment?"

"I will not be dictated to. The house is my own property, and I will do as I like with it."

"But this is an unheard of thing," said the unfortunate House Agent, who began to see more difficulties cropping up ahead of him, unless he could induce the wrathful old gentleman to adhere to the agreement he had originally made. He therefore set himself the task of endeavouring to appease him—a by no means easy thing to do. But John had a manner few could resist, and, when he set himself to please, he generally managed to accomplish his task. At the end of something like half an hour, when he had examined more butterflies and beetles than he had ever seen in his life, and will probably never see again, he succeeded in persuading him to go through with the matter. It is probable that the offer made by the Countess to permit the room in which the collection was stored, to remain locked, and moreover to allow him to keep the key, had a great deal to do with this amicable settlement. It is also likely that the cheque that John handed him for the year's rent

played an important part in it. It was plain that the old fellow was as miserly as he was irascible, for he snatched eagerly at the slip of paper, and seemed inclined at first to dispute the amount which the other had deducted for his commission. To the date of possession he at length grudgingly consented.

"And now with regard to the agreement. Shall I draw it, or would you prefer that it should be done by your solicitors?"

The old man flew into another passion.

"I have no solicitors," he growled. "I hate the very name of the profession. What do they solicit? only the opportunity to make your life miserable and to prey upon you. Draw the agreement yourself, and let it be as plain as possible. I don't want any legal phrases or nonsense of that kind in it. Afterwards post it to me here and I will sign it and Perkins can witness it."

The young man promised to do his best, and then bade Mr. Mortimer good-day.

The latter scarcely deigned to answer him, and, almost before he had time to reach the door, he was back again poring over his captive beetle.

As Drummond followed Perkins down the path to the gate, he said to himself, "John Drummond,

you must never grow to be an old gentleman like that." "

Before he left the premises, John could not help delivering a parting shot.

"I understand you know my friend, Mr. Dexter?" he said, casually.

For once the man was taken off his guard.

"Mr. Dexter?" he repeated—as if he were not quite sure of the name. Then seeing that he had made a mistake, he added quickly, "Ah, yes, sir, of course I know Mr. Dexter. Mr. Dexter has been very kind to me."

"Have you known him long?" John then enquired, with apparent unconcern.

"Not so very long, sir," the man replied. "Only since he has been visiting Master."

"Indeed! Well, I must be getting on. Good-day to you."

"Good-day to you, sir."

Drummond scratched his chin reflectively when he was seated in his cab once more.

"Dexter described him as having served his family. Master Perkins denies the soft impeachment, and declares that he has only known the other a few weeks. It seems to me that there is some good square lying somewhere. And again

the eternal question crops up—'What is the reason of it all?'

But he was getting tired of asking himself that. It was a conundrum to which there appeared to be no answer. The fact that Perkins had not seemed to recognise the name of Dexter, also gave him food for reflection. It was quite certain that the man had been taken off his guard for the moment, and this suggested the fact that it was within the bounds of possibility that that somewhat uncommon patronymic might not really be that which had been handed down to Dexter by his ancestors.

From The Cedars he drove back to his office, where he found a client awaiting him. The dictation of several letters to Nicodemus occupied another hour, after which it was time for him to make his way to the Club for luncheon. He did not wish to be late, for he felt that that meal was destined to be one of the most extraordinary of which he had ever partaken.

He was the first to arrive at the rendezvous, and he was not inclined to regret the fact, for, in the smoking room, he discovered the man of all others he particularly wanted to see. They had the room to themselves, which again was a fortunate occurrence. John drew up a chair near the others, and



prepared to question him on the subject then uppermost in his mind.

"Look here, Merrick," he began. "I want you to answer me a question, if you can. I know it's not quite the thing to make enquiries about a man, whose hospitality one is about to enjoy, but I want you to tell me what you can about Dexter. You know everybody."

"Which is to imply," put in the other with a laugh, "that I am a sort of busybody, who spends his life prying into other people's affairs. You're a nice sort of fellow to have for a friend, I must say."

"I don't mean that at all, and you know it," John replied, "but I *do* want to hear what you can tell me about the man in question. Believe me, I have excellent reasons for asking the question."

"Going to sell him a house, I suppose, or something of that sort?" said Merrick. "Well, in that case, my advice is be careful. I've known Dexter for upwards of three years now, and I have heard some queer stories about him. Here's his history, as far as I know it. I understand he went through the Franco-Prussian War on the side of the French. He held a commission, but what induced him to

give up soldiering, I cannot tell you. "He himself has told me that he has spent several years in America, and I believe he saw some fighting in one of the Southern Republics. Report says he is a fine pistol shot, and has been out with his man more than once. As a matter of fact, that is really all I can tell you about him. If the information is of any use to you, you're welcome to it."

"He's not a married man, I suppose? I have a particular reason for asking that."

"Not that I have ever heard—and we certainly know nothing of any lady down here. In fact, I have a sort of notion that he is a woman hater."

"Thanks very much. I am exceedingly obliged to you."

At that moment the door opened, and the man they had been discussing entered the room. He certainly looked what the other had described him as—a man who knew his world, and who could be trusted to take good care of himself. On this occasion, however, perhaps on account of the fact of his projected visit to the French Capital, he was unusually spruce, while his pointed grey moustache stood out on either cheek as stiff as ramrods.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting, Drummond," he said, apologetically. "But when one is going away everything seems to crowd itself into the last few hours. Shall we come in to lunch?"

Drummond not dissenting, they passed into the dining-room, where a table had been reserved for them.

"I was afraid you might not be able to come," said Dexter, as they seated themselves. "I half thought the Man of Business might deem it inconsistent to lunch with the Idle Apprentice. However, I'm extremely glad to see you. I only wish that you were running across to the Gay City with me. I suppose, however, that's out of the question. I should enjoy your company immensely."

As John heard the compliment the other paid him, he thought of the card then reposing in his pocket. What sort of a companion would "that ass of a House Agent" be likely to prove in such a place? Aloud, however, he made some laughing rejoinder, and the meal proceeded with great cordiality on either side.

"To my thinking," said the other, after a while, "there is no place like Paris in the world. Some people prefer Vienna, it is true, others St. Peters-

burg, but give me Paris—the gay streets, the life upon the boulevards—the beautiful women—not perhaps more beautiful than your fair client of a few days ago. I don't wish to be indiscreet, but has she favoured you with another visit?"

"Now," thought Drummond, "we're coming to grips." Aloud he said, "I had a visit from her yesterday."

"You are to be envied," rejoined his companion, toying with his wine glass as he spoke. "I would that I had known that. Since the business is probably concluded, is it permissible to ask her name?"

John shook his head.

"That I am afraid I cannot tell you," he said, "even in return for your hospitality. If you ever meet her, you will doubtless find it out for yourself."

"Hard hearted man!" Dexter retorted, in mock reproach. "The question as to where she is living would, I presume, meet with the same fate."

"I fear so!"

"Then I shall certainly not put it."

The conversation then drifted off into other channels, until at last it became time for Drummond to return to his office. He did so in the best of tempers with himself and the world in

general. He had settled the matter with Mr. Mortimer concerning the house, and Dexter was off to Paris, so would be out of the way when the Countess moved in. Immediately on reaching his office he drew up and dispatched the advertisement to the *Times*, drafted the agreement, and set Nicodemus to work to make copies of it. This being completed, he told himself he would think no more about the matter until the time should arrive for him again to proceed to The Cedars. But in most cases it is easier to say that you will not think of a thing than actually to do it. Though he endeavoured to forget it, he found his mind continually reverting to the Countess. A pretty woman is not easily forgotten, and so John Drummond discovered. He was not a very impressionable young man, yet the lady's charming personality had taken an extremely strong hold upon him. On one occasion he even caught himself sighing when the picture of her lovely face rose before his mind's eye.

"Don't be a fool, John Drummond," he said angrily to himself. "Because one of your clients happens to be a beautiful woman, it is not necessary for you to turn grampus. What is the

Countess to you—or what could she ever be? You ought to know that.”

He was on the river at the time, and the thought so exasperated him that he drove his pole on to the bottom of the stream with such violence that he well nigh upset the punt, causing young Master Barton, who was with him, some considerable amount of alarm.

At last Tuesday came, the day on which he was to present the agreements for the Countess's signature. He had made up his mind that he would not visit the house until late in the afternoon, in order to give the ladies time to settle down. From what the Countess had said to him, he gathered that she would go in as early as possible in the morning. If he smartened himself up a little on this particular occasion, who can blame him? The man who does not like to look his best in the eyes of a pretty woman, must be lacking in a sense of the fitness of things. Indeed, if the truth must be told, he presented a very manly and pleasing figure when he stepped into his cab at four o'clock that afternoon.

When he reached the house, he rang the bell, which, after some little delay, was answered by

a tall, dignified maid-servant, who gazed at him with what was almost an air of surprise. Doubtless she took him for a caller, and thought it rather soon for such visits of ceremony to commence.

"Is Mrs. Ferrars at home?" John enquired, giving her the name by which the Countess desired to be known in England.

"No, sir," the woman replied, "she has not arrived yet, but Miss Conyers is here. Would you care to see her?"

Miss Conyers he took to be the companion of whom he had heard the Countess speak. He felt some little curiosity to make her acquaintance and accordingly answered in the affirmative.

"Then will you be pleased to come this way, sir?" the servant continued, and led him into the house and down the long corridor

As he had placed the taking of the inventory in other hands, he had not penetrated into this portion of the house before. If the truth must be confessed he was not prepossessed by it. It was sparsely furnished, and what there was of it was old, and in many cases, in exceedingly bad repair. Here and there the paper had become detached from the walls and rustled in the draught from

the front door. Half-way down the passage the woman paused and opened a door.

"If you will step in here I will tell Miss Conyers. What name shall I say, sir?"

"Mr. Drummond," he answered. "It was through me that Mrs. Ferrars took this house."

She then left him, and he was at leisure to examine the apartment in which he found himself. It was evidently the drawing-room, and looked as if it had not been used for years. The furniture was of the style of the early Victorian period, and as ugly as anything that could be imagined. On either side of the fireplace were worked fire-screens, the colours of which had faded so much as to be almost undiscernible. Altogether its dreariness matched what he had seen of the remainder of the house. Through the windows a tangled overgrown garden was to be seen with the high wall bounding all.

"What reason on earth induced the Countess to take this wretched old caravanserai, I cannot for the life of me imagine," muttered Drummond in disgust.

Before he could frame any reply, the door opened and a tall, young lady, of perhaps two or three-and-



twenty, entered the room. If this were the companion, the Countess could not have chosen a better foil. The girl was handsome, rather than pretty—her face showed considerable character, as did the simplicity of her tailor-made dress. She possessed fine eyes, and wavy brown hair. Drummond noticed also that when she looked at him she did so in an honest, straightforward way that was without any trace of coquetry.

"Good-day, Mr. Drummond," she said, with perfect self-assurance. "Won't you sit down?" Mrs. Ferrars told me that I might expect you this afternoon."

She spoke the name without embarrassment, and from this Drummond came to the conclusion that she was unaware of the other's rank.

"I gather from what the servant tells me that Mrs. Ferrars has not arrived yet?"

"No," the girl answered. "When she met me at Waterloo this morning, she informed me that she was detained by important business, but that she would be down to-morrow about midday."

The fact that she had met the girl at Waterloo struck John as being a trifle peculiar. However, he did not of course comment on it.

"Then I must bring the agreement up for her signature to-morrow," he continued. "Would the same time be convenient, do you think?"

"I think so," she answered. "At least, I am sure it would."

"Then I will consider that in the light of an appointment." So saying, he rose to go. "I am afraid you will be very lonely here in this dreary old house," he continued.

"Oh, dear no," she answered, with a little laugh. "I am used to being quiet. Nothing could have been more so than my own home on Dartmoor."

"Ah, I forgot," he said. "You and Mrs. Ferrars are, of course, great travellers. You have seen a lot of the world together, I believe."

She shook her head.

"I have never been out of England in my life," was her astounding reply, "and I have only known Mrs. Ferrars since this morning. I answered an advertisement in the *Times* and met her at Waterloo before coming on here."

"Then I must have been mistaken," Drummond replied. "Probably she referred to someone else." Then he added to himself, "another fib, my pretty lady—I wonder how many more I shall hear!"

Promising to return on the following afternoon, Drummond bade Miss Conyers good-bye, and betook himself back to his office.

"That's a good, honest girl," he thought, "and it will be a thousand pities if she gets mixed up in any unpleasantness. I am beginning to think our beautiful Countess is not, to use the words of the song, "all my fancy paints her"—she has certainly deceived me on several occasions."

At the appointed hour on the following afternoon John again presented himself at The Cedars, to be informed at the gate that Mrs. Ferrars had not yet returned, but that the woman believed Miss Conyers had received a letter from her.

"Perhaps I had better see Miss Conyers," said the other, a trifle sharply, for he was annoyed at having paid another fruitless visit.

Again he was shown into the drawing-room, and once more Miss Conyers made her appearance.

"I really don't know how to apologise to you, Mr. Drummond," she said; "but Mrs. Ferrars has not yet come down. I have, however, received a letter from her, which, I think, under the circumstances, I should be justified in showing you."

She produced it from her pocket and handed it

to him. The paper was delicately scented, and, as John realised it, he seemed to see the Countess standing before him, in all her witching beauty. The note ran as follows:—

Dear Miss Conyers,

But really, while I think of it, you must let me call you Madeleine, Miss Conyers sounds so very formal between two people who are going to live so happily together. I hope you reached The Cedars safely, and that you have not been overworking yourself. Do see that you have everything you want. Write to Mudie's for a box of books. I have subscribed to them *in your name*. I am more than sorry to say it will be quite impossible for me to get down to The Cedars for at least another week. My poor friend, whom I think I told you I am nursing, lies in a critical condition, so the doctors say, and I dare not leave her. I do hope, my dear, you will not find life unendurable until we meet.

Always affectionately yours,

MARION FERRARS.

Had Miss Conyers not been present, John would

have laughed outright. The sick friend struck him as being a remarkable stroke of humour—while he smiled at the impudence of endeavouring to console this poor girl for her loneliness in that miserable house with a box of books from Mudie's. The statement that the subscription had been taken out in her name was, knowing what he did, scarcely as generous as it appeared. What concerned him most was the fact that the letter contained no mention of himself or of his business with her.

"I am very sorry for your sake that Mrs. Ferrars has not arrived," he said. "For my own part I must wait until I *can* see her. Would it be troubling you too much to let me know when she does come down? I will leave you one of my cards."

She promised to do so, after which he took his departure.

To his surprise, on reaching his office, he found a letter from his client herself upon his desk. In it she apologised most humbly for the inconvenience she was causing him, and again excused herself on the plea of the sick friend. She declared she should rejoin her companion at The Cedars in a week, or ten days, at latest, when she would at

once attach her signature to the documents. Then, with an assurance that she was always very sincerely his, she signed herself Marion Ferrars.

He placed the letter carefully in a drawer.

"I shall keep it," he said, "as a memento of the strangest bit of business I have ever had to do."

## • CHAPTER VI

AS a matter of fact nearly a fortnight elapsed before Drummond received a note from Miss Conyers to the effect that Mrs. Ferrars had at last arrived at her residence. He found it on his table one morning, and was immediately struck with the character displayed by the handwriting on the envelope. It was almost masculine in its firmness. Instinct told him that the letter was from the Countess' companion, and the signature assured him of the fact. The lady of the house had returned that afternoon, it appeared, and would be very glad if Mr. Drummond would bring the agreement for her signature at his convenience. If he, Mr. Drummond, the letter went on, would care to come to lunch at half-past one on the day following, it would give Mrs. Ferrars very much pleasure to see him.

"Vastly polite; but I wonder what the meaning of it is?" he asked himself. "I suppose she wants something else out of me. I am afraid it's ungracious to say so, but I am getting a little distrustful of her fair ladyship and her pretty ways. And if she knew it, she could scarcely wonder at it, all things considered. However, I suppose I shall have to go. It will be an interesting experience at any rate."

He accordingly wrote a polite note of acceptance, and then addressed himself to his business.

On the day following he duly presented himself at the house at the hour mentioned, and was immediately admitted. He no sooner entered the Hall than he was struck by the change it presented. The walls had been hung with a fair imitation of tapestry, and two armoured figures stood on pedestals on either side. The floor was covered with a rich Turkey carpet, while large carved monk's benches formed seats between the two figures. Altogether the transformation was most remarkable, and Drummond could scarcely believe the evidence of his eyes as he looked around him.

At the further end, and shutting off the corridor leading to the drawing-room, were two heavy



curtains. On the other side of these the change was equally marked, while the drawing room, when he entered it, and which he had hitherto looked upon as one of the most hideous rooms he had ever set foot in, was as charming an apartment as the most fastidious mistress in England could desire. The walls were draped with some soft coloured silk, and were hung with old china which his experience told him, must be of considerable value—curtains, to match the walls, decorated the windows, and a carpet of considerable worth covered the floor. The furniture and fireplace fittings were on a corresponding scale, while three large palms in handsome brass pots gave an added grace to the picture. In the corner by the window stood a grand piano, open, and with a quantity of music scattered about on it. There were two revolving book cases, filled to overflowing, to testify to the literary tastes of the occupants, while, on a small table, an open silver cigarette box half empty, suggested that one, if not both, of the ladies was a devotee of the fragrant weed.

"This is simply marvellous," Drummond said to himself, as he looked about him. "I would not have believed it could have been done, if I had

not seen it with my own eyes. Miss Conyers must be responsible for it, since the Countess only returned last night. Well, it certainly does her credit. The garden, too, I see, is beginning to show signs of having had some attention bestowed upon it. I wonder what old Mortimer would say to it all, if he could see it."

He was still admiring it, when the soft rustle of a lady's dress caught his ear, and he turned towards the door just in time to see Mrs. Ferrars enter. It would be impossible for me, a mere man, to give you anything like an adequate idea of how beautiful and how ethereal she looked at that moment. Indeed, her loveliness now struck him as being of quite a different description to what he had originally thought it.

She was dressed in a morning robe of some pale pink material, with much lace and chiffon scattered about it; this gave it a curious diaphanous appearance, so that she seemed to float into the room rather than to walk. Her hair was dressed in a fashion John had never seen before, and he willingly admitted to himself that it became her admirably. She advanced towards him, holding out her hand as if to greet an old friend.

"Am I to be forgiven?" she asked, with a pretence of humility. "Believe me, I am prepared to be very penitent."

"There is nothing for me to forgive," John replied, smiling. "Mr. Mortimer is the person to whom you should apply, but, as he is probably catching beetles and thinking of nothing else in the world, we can afford to leave him out of the question. I trust your friend is better?"

"Alas, no!" she replied, sadly. "I fear her days are numbered. I should not have left her, but my nerves gave way and I could bear the strain no longer. It was a terrible time for me, for I am very fond of her."

She spoke in such a pathetic way, and looked so sad, that for a moment John felt that her tale must be true, and that he had been little short of a brute for ever having doubted her.

In a few moments, however, she was herself once more, and chatting as merrily as if she had never known a care in her life. The transition was so sudden that all his suspicions woke to life again.

"What do you think of the house?" she asked, looking round the room complacently. "Don't you consider the change a great improvement? I

scarcely knew it when I saw it, I mean, of course, for the first time, yesterday. Your description of it was so terrible, you may remember! It almost made me give up the idea of taking it!"

She spoke the latter portion of her speech with unusual quickness, as if she were anxious to divert his thoughts from some slip she had made. He noticed it, and wondered whether she had ever been inside the house before. He recalled the fact that she had distinctly informed him, on the occasion of their first interview, that she had not. But she had already told him more than one "farradiddle."

"I was amazed when I saw the transformation," he replied, "It has turned a ruin into a palace. I must congratulate you on your taste. The effect is most charming."

"Oh, you must not praise me," she answered. "I am not in any way responsible. The whole credit belongs to Miss Conyers, whom, I believe, you have already met."

"On two occasions," said the other. "She must have worked very hard to have accomplished so much in so short a time. It would have taken me three months, and then I should have bungled it."

"Me—also! But she is an indefatigable worker—as well as a most charming girl. I only met her for the first time on the day that we took possession—but I liked her at once. My last poor companion, who, as I think I told you, travelled with me for many years, is the friend whom I have been nursing."

Drummond, who was now continually on the watch, wondered whether this was said with a deliberate purpose. He made some commonplace reply, and a moment later, Miss Conyers entered the room. They shook hands and then the gong sounded for lunch.

The dining-room, which was large and lofty, and in the front of the house, it appeared, had been turned into a studio—a small room at the back taking its place as a *salle-à-manger*.

"It would have been more than dreary for two lone women to have to take their meals, day by day, in such a barn. We should have been lost in it, so I am thankful to Madeleine for deciding upon this room. It is infinitely cosier and nicer in every way."

It certainly was a pretty room, and much to be preferred to the other. Old Mr. Mortimer had

lived in it, when he was not in his study, and in consequence it was kept in a better state of preservation than the other rooms. Several excellent pictures decorated the walls, the sideboard and the marble fireplace were also exceedingly handsome. Numerous feminine touches were, however, observable, particularly in respect of the decoration of the table, which was almost fairylike in its daintiness, and which he felt sure had been arranged by the tasteful Miss Conyers. The hostess sat at one end of the table, which was small and oval in shape, her companion at the other, Drummond between them and facing the window.

The lunch itself had been as carefully thought out as everything else, and was of a kind such as John had never eaten in his native town before. Mrs. Ferrars' cook must certainly have been a good one, and he conjectured that he or she, whichever it might be, hailed from across the Channel, which as a matter of fact was the case. Had he known what he does now, he would not have been surprised that he appreciated his culinary gifts. But of that more hereafter.

During the meal they chatted on many subjects. Miss Conyers told tales of Dartmoor; Mrs. Ferrars

narrated some amusing incidents connected with her travels, in one of which the name of a certain Austrian grand duke figured. It appeared that for upwards of half-an-hour she had held her life in her hands, for the reason that she bore an extraordinary resemblance to a certain woman who was suspected of endeavouring to smuggle seditious literature into the Kingdom of the Czar. As she told this story she glanced at Drummond, and for a moment their eyes met. It was as if she were bent on telling him the story of her life, and he gave a little nod as if to show that he understood.

"I have often wondered," she went on in continuation of her narrative, "what became of that poor woman. What was her fault? She believed in freedom for all men. She believed that the poor were as much entitled to the priceless benefits of education as the rich. And she knew that the only way to obtain justice for them was to show them what they wanted, and to teach them the way in which they must set to work to obtain it. To do this she carried her life in her hands, both by day and night. She never knew from one moment to another what might befall her. One slip, one little mistake, and the iron hand of the

most inexorable law in the world would close upon her, and without trial, without an opportunity of escape, she would be haled away to drag out the remainder of her existence in the desolation of Siberia. But, on the other hand, perhaps she escaped; perhaps she reached a friendly country where justice prevails, and she may be in peace."

"I hope she did, poor soul," murmured Miss Conyers.

John Drummond only made bread pills upon the table-cloth, and seemed to be taking particular care that they should be of just the solidity he wanted. Was this, or was it not, the true secret of the woman who called herself the Countess Londa, and now Mrs. Ferrars? If so, she must be one of the noblest of her sex, and it would account for everything—even for Dexter, for he had heard rumours that the man was believed to have been mixed up in several foreign conspiracies. The unfortunate part of it was that it would not account for the estimable Perkins—unless he were in the plot, which seemed scarcely likely.

"What would you do to that woman if you should happen to meet her and hear her story, Mr. Drummond?" asked Mrs. Ferrars, after the



short pause that followed Miss Conyers' remark.

"I should do all I could for her if I knew her and believed in her," John replied, honestly. "I should be proud to do so. Unfortunately, however, London swarms with revolutionists of every sort of description."

"Ah, but this is a priestess of what you might call revolution in its highest form," replied the other, as if she were anxious to convince him. "This is not cutting down and destroying after the manner of Anarchists, but the building up of a new and better order of things in a land where all is evil. Bloodshed and a reign of terror will never help forward the work that woman and her friends are trying to accomplish. It must be done by gentler means. All who know the Russian Moujik know that."

She spoke so earnestly and with such a deep pathos in her voice, that John turning to look at her, saw tears standing in Miss Conyers' eyes. He, himself, felt a little lump rising in his throat, which was not usually there. Then his hostess's manner changed entirely and she once more became her old self.

"Good gracious," she cried, "we are becoming

quite solemn. It was all my fault for recalling that story—and I apologise. Let us forget it. Who knows what the woman was, what she did, or what became of her? Let us trust, as you say, that she escaped and that, at the present moment, she possesses sufficient common sense to remain in the security she has found. Mr. Drummond, won't you have a little more champagne? You have had scarcely any. Madeleine, you must have some more! Parker, fill Miss Conyers' glass and also Mr. Drummond's. I remember once in Rome——"

And then she branched off into another anecdote, which proved how a sharp American had once managed to outwit one of the Pope's secretaries, and to obtain an audience with his Holiness after it had been several times refused. Her gaiety was infectious and the little shadow that had descended on them a few minutes before was, under its influence, entirely blown away. At last she rose and suggested that they should adjourn to the drawing-room, where she offered the silver cigarette box to Drummond.

"You smoke, of course?" she said. "I hope you will like these. I get them from a quaint little character in Constantinople—a man for whom a

friend of mine once did a great service. They are supposed to be equal to those smoked by the Sultan; but never having smoked with him, I cannot vouch for the truth of that."

John took one and then enquired whether it was permissible to smoke in the drawing-room? In some respects he was of the old school, and he could easily imagine his mother's pious horror at the thought of the fumes of even such delicate tobacco coming in contact with the delicate fabrics of the curtains and cushions.

"Please smoke here or anywhere else," his hostess replied, as she placed a cigarette between her dainty lips and lit it. "Unfortunately I cannot persuade Miss Conyers to join me. However, I may be able to induce her to do so in time."

John looked across the room to where the girl was standing by the window. She and Mrs. Ferrars were almost of an age, and yet how vastly different they were. In one case the rough experience of the world had served to sharpen the wits to razor keenness—in the other a quiet, healthy country life—spent among homely village folk had taught self-reliance in its purest sense—a faculty of thinking of and for others, and a gentle

compassion that only immediate contact with the very poor can ever hope to give. The one ever of the world that takes, the other of the world that gives. The difference is larger than many people imagine!

"Madeleine dear, won't you play us something?" said Mrs. Ferrar's, after a little time, and when the conversation was beginning to flag. "For some reason I feel a craving for music this afternoon."

Miss Conyers remarked that it would give her great pleasure to play, and immediately went to the piano, where she seated herself. What she played was something of Chopin's, but I don't think John could tell you to-day what it was. So many things have happened since then to make him forget. Besides, I don't think he altogether likes to remember that time.

Nevertheless, I know that he realised from the moment her fingers touched the keys, that he was listening to an instrumentalist of rare sympathy and execution. Upon his hostess the music produced an extraordinary effect. She lay back in her chair, her eyes closed and her hands clenched. Presently her cigarette dropped to the floor, and

John Drummond, noticing it, stooped and picked it up, placing it upon the ash-tray on the table by her side. For a moment he was half tempted to call Miss Conyers' attention to her condition, then the music ceased, and Mrs. Ferrars opened her eyes and looked about her in a frightened way, as if she were not quite sure where she were. She afterwards gave a little shiver, as if she were cold. That her condition was not assumed was evidenced by the pallor of her complexion, which was as white as a sheet of note-paper. She uttered a little nervous laugh and turned to Drummond.

"Is it not extraordinary," she said, "that music should produce such an effect upon me? Chopin and Beethoven in particular. It seems to hypnotise me till I scarcely know what I am doing. You play most beautifully, my dear Madeleine, but I don't think we'll have any more to-day. Otherwise I shall be fit for nothing."

The other rose obediently, and then, making some excuse, left the room. Her thoroughness was exemplified by the manner in which she went out of her way to set a cushion straight on one of the settees before taking her departure. It was a strange companionship, that of these two women

—how strange John did not realise until long afterwards. Then, of course, it was too late.

Shortly after three o'clock he began to think it was time for him to take his departure. He accordingly suggested that, if it were convenient to her, his client should attach her signature to the documents he had brought with him. This she willingly consented to do. A pen and ink were procured, and both copies were soon signed. After that he bade his hostess good-bye, and left the house, having had no opportunity of making his adieu to her companion.

• It was a warm afternoon, and, in consequence, he walked slowly back to the town. He did not know what to think about either his hostess or the hospitality she had shown him. The story she had told at lunch, or rather her dramatic rendering of it, still haunted him, and, the more he thought of it, the further he seemed to be from understanding it. She had evidently intended him to believe that the woman for whom she was so anxious to obtain his pity was herself—but behind it all there was an uneasy feeling that, had the story been a true one, and if she were in hiding in England, as the taking of such a house, with

such elaborate precautions, would seem to suggest, she would scarcely have made him her confidant. Knowing what he did of her, this seemed an indisputable argument against the likelihood of there being any truth in her story. If not, what had she to gain by telling him?

## CHAPTER VII •

IF there is one man in the great country beyond the Herring Pond who during his lifetime was cordially detested by everyone save the members of his own immediate family—that man was Silas Jessop Webber—though after the fashion of so many of his countrymen he only used the initial of his second name. He was a millionaire several times over, and about as hard a nut as it would be possible to crack—indeed, I doubt very much whether it would have been possible to crack such a nut as he at all. I must confess I should not have liked to attempt it myself. Many folk had pitted themselves against him at one time and another, and they had all—or very nearly all—come to signal grief. His name was synonymous with corners, trusts, combines, and those other little business amusements which so delight the hearts, and



occasionally the pockets, of our Transatlantic brethren.

From the days of his earliest youth, Silas was reported to have been without the bowels of compassion. At the early age of six, as his brothers and sisters knew to their cost, he was a power to be reckoned with. Though one of the youngest members of the family, he had more will power than all the rest put together. Unconscious of the business training it was giving him, he created corners in marbles and chewing gum, and in the matter of tops and other such infantile possessions he was invariably the richest in all the circle of his acquaintance. He under-bought and over-sold from and to his companions and in his case the child was certainly father to the man. At school he was a plodding rather than a brilliant boy, though having once set himself to any study, he never relinquished it until he had mastered it in every detail. His life after he left school was a varied one, and, had he but known it, was in reality the commencement of a second and certainly more liberal education. He first became a printer in a small Western town, but the life did not appeal to him. It did not contain the Romance of Gain. Accordingly we next find him acting as store-

keeper's assistant in Dakota, gaining a knowledge of trade that was to stand him in excellent stead in days to come. From the store to one of the primitive country banks was but a natural transition, and it was then that he found he had entered seriously in life. The mysteries of finance had a peculiar fascination for him; for the first time in his existence he really understood the power of wealth. With the clear perception of the born financier, he saw the opportunities that presented themselves to the man of capital. He was moreover a hard worker; and he slaved at the bank by day and night, hated by his fellow clerks, and, if the truth must be told, more than a little feared by his employer, some of whose secrets he had managed to discover and to trade upon. By the time he had been two years in the bank he was cashier, and a year later saw him in the proud position of manager. He was then just thirty. The time, he told himself, had now come for action. One evening he called at his employer's house and asked to see him. The latter had just finished his evening meal and was smoking a cigar in his study at the back of the house.

"Well, Webber, what is it?" he asked, as the short, thick-set bulldog-faced man entered the

room. "Anything wrong at the bank? You don't often favour me with a visit at this time of the evening. Sit right down!"

"I've too much to do," the other replied, taking the chair and the cigar that were offered him. "But I thought I'd drop in to-night just to have a little talk with you. I reckoned it up, and it seemed to me as if it was about time we had a bit of a chat."

The banker did not altogether like the free-and-easy way in which the other spoke. He remembered how much the other knew, and it made him feel nervous. He was a deacon of his church, and a shining light in the chief religious circle of the town. Exposure, therefore, he argued, would in his case be worse than death.

"I am very glad to talk to you," he said, with assumed affability. "What shall it be about?"

"Waal," replied Silas, with his long nasal drawl, "I reckon it might as well be about the bank. Between ourselves and that lamp there, I don't mind telling you, Mr. Gosford, that I'm tired of bein' manager of the concern."

He paused to see what the other would say. He had all his cards ready, but he was going to

play them carefully. He, who was really master, watched his employer as a cat does a mouse.

"You do not mean, Silas, that you intend leaving the bank?" said the other, catching like a drowning man at the faint straw of hope. He tried, however, to appear deeply concerned at the young man's intelligence. "I do not like to think that there is any chance of my losing your services."

"Waal, there is," said Silas, puffing slowly at his cigar as if to enjoy its full flavour. "I've been thinkin' it over and I can't see my way to servin' you no longer."

• In his heart the Banker was engaged in offering up a prayer of thankfulness. With the man out of the way he would be safe. But he knew that he must not show his feelings, he must dissemble.

"This is very sad news you have for me, Silas," he went on. "You have served me well, and I shall miss you sadly."

Silas eyed him carefully. There was a curious expression on his face that the Banker would not have altogether cared about had he been able to see it. Fortunately, however, for his peace of mind, the lamp was between them. There was a silence of upwards of a minute—while each waited for the other to speak.

"When will you wish to go?" asked Mr Gosford, steadying his voice as much as was possible, in order to conceal his eagerness.

His tormentor stretched his legs and paused before he replied. He knew the state of the other's nerves and was trading on it.

"I don't know as I shall go at all," he answered at length. "Leastways not if we can fix it up like as I hope we shall." He waited for this to sink in before he said any more.

"But you said you could no longer serve me," gasped the unfortunate Banker. "What did you mean?"

"Exactly what I said," Silas replied. "I can no longer serve you. That's plain enough English, surelie?"

"I am afraid I do not understand. If you can no longer be my servant—that must mean that you wish to leave me."

"Don't see how! A man ain't called upon to be a servant all his life, is he? For my part I reckon I want to be something better before I die—and better 'twill have to be, or I'll know the reason why. Now look here, Mr. Gosford, own up to it straight and fair, like a man, haven't I made your business twice what it was when I came to you?"

The Banker knew that this was a fact but his vanity would not allow him to admit it altogether.

"I am quite prepared to say, Silas," he began pompously, "that you have certainly been most assiduous in your endeavour to promote the Bank's interest. In fact you have been, as I said just now, of very great assistance to me. And I willingly acknowledge it!"

"Waal," said Silas, "have it that way if you like. It's all the same to me. A dollar's a dollar even if somebody else calls it a cent. I say I've made your Bank for you and now I want my reward"

"Your reward?" faltered the other, feeling that the crisis was approaching. "I don't understand your meaning."

"Waal, you will in a minute when I'm through. I'm a plain dealer and a plain speaker and that's the truth of it. You can't get on without me, least-ways not to call getting on. Now I want to get on as fast as I know how. And this is the way I mean to do it. The long and the short of it is, partnership's the word that spells it!"

"Do you mean that you wish me to take you into partnership?" asked the Banker aghast.

"That's about the size of the article," replied

Silas, calmly. "Take me into partnership and see how she'll hum!"

"But, man alive, you don't know what you are asking. You must be mad, surely. I never heard such a proposition in my life."

"Waal!" (Oh, how the wretched Banker hated that word, and winced at every repetition of it) "I reckon you've heard it now, and you're like to hear it again. No! I know well what I'm asking, and if I'm a madman there ain't a sane one this side of N' York. Come, now, you'd make up your mind to it, for it's got to be, willy-nilly."

Gosford seeing no other way out of it, determined, as a last resource to play a game of bluff.

"Silas, you forget yourself," he said, but with no great show of firmness. "I will not allow you to speak to me thus."

But Silas was not in the least abashed by this rebuke. He only smiled, and then his mouth set firm.

"I'll speak any way you like," he said, "provided you do what I want. It's no use sayin' you won't, because it will only give pain to both sides. I've got four thousand dollars and that shall go in. Take me with it and I'll double the business inside a year, mark my word for it!"

"And if I refuse your request? What am I to expect then?"

"I hope you won't for your own sake and the sake of your family—a déacon too! As old Miss Poffit says, 'It would be too terrible!'"

The Banker gasped for breath. The hand resting on the arm of the chair trembled like a leaf.

"You have no proof," he managed to say, though the words were hardly intelligible. "I defy you to prove that you know anything against my reputation!"

"You do, do you? Very good then. Look here!"

As he said this he produced a leather writing-case from his pocket, from which he took two letters.

"Oh," the wretched Banker thought to himself, "if only I could get hold of them, I could tear them up before he could prevent me, and then I should be free." He tried to pull himself together and to appear unconcerned.

"Let me look at them," he said, holding out his hand as he spoke. "They may have nothing to do with me."

He could scarcely believe his good fortune when



Silas threw them down on the table. The man was a fool after all. Now he was safe! He clutched at them fiercely and held them up to the light. Then his face fell. *They were only copies!* Silas had tricked him again. The latter laughed sardonically.

"You didn't think I was going to let you have the originals, did you?" he said. "Scarcely! They're in safe keeping, where you can't get at them. Come, Deacon," (he used the word mockingly) "can't we trade. Think it over and make up your mind. I'm in no hurry".

"What do you mean by 'can't we trade'?" asked the other, who was experiencing such torture as he had never known in his life before.

"This is what I mean," continued Silas, quietly and with great deliberation. "You take me in as partner, and on the day that the deed is signed, I'll hand you the originals of these two letters. Then you'll find we'll get on well together, and I'll not only double your income for you—but nobody will know that Deacon Gosford is anything but the saintliest man in all the states of N' York—such as they think him now! What do you say? It's a hand worth playin' for, ain't it?"

"Give me until to-morrow to think it over," cried the other. "I cannot decide such a momentous question to-night."

"That's just where you're wrong," said his tormentor. "It must be to-night or never. To-morrow I want to get right to work. There's a big deal on the boards, and I want to have a hand in it. Now, you see!"

For upwards of three minutes Mr. Gosford sat huddled up in his chair, looking straight before him, but seeing nothing. He was thinking of the bank he had built up, and of the pride he had taken in it. Now to think that half his glory was to be snatched from him by this unprincipled ruffian, who would probably end by sending him adrift, without a second thought. And yet, what was he to do? If those letters were shown about in the town, his reputation was gone for ever, his business would vanish (for it was a puritanical little settlement) and he would be socially and commercially ruined. A groan escaped him before he could suppress it. Silas heard it, and knew that the day was won. He had advanced another step on the road to wealth.

"Well, Mr. Gosford," he said at last, "have you

made up your mind as to what you will do?"

"I accept," moaned the other. "I cannot help myself. You have me in your clutches and I am powerless."

Next day the deed of partnership was signed, and it became known officially that for the future the business would be carried on under the title of "Gosford and Webber." Now it was that Silas came out in his true colours.

He ruled his partner and his clerks with an iron hand. He drove them as hard as he drove himself; but on the other hand he paid them well. Every balance found the business extending. He was moreover a daring speculator. Risks that no other man would take he took, and in most cases brought them off successfully, for few men cared to defy or to fight Silas Webber. He was as remorseless as Shylock, and as cruel as a hyena. What was more, he was fast becoming a millionaire, and that added to his power. Five years after the evening I have described, found him in New York, feared, hated, and growing every day too powerful to be hurt. As time went on rings were formed to break him, but to their surprise and consternation, he turned the tables and ended by

breaking them. Nothing came amiss to him; all was fish that came to his net. The most unlikely and improbable speculations turned into gold mines under his wizard's wand. He took up a stretch of country that no one else would look at, and found oil. A thriving city immediately sprang up, and he owned every block. By a piece of questionable diplomacy he wriggled his way into a prominent railroad company which had defied him, and, almost before any one knew what had happened, had obtained a controlling interest in it. Of the old saying to the effect that even the cleverest men are apt to make mistakes, Silas Webber may be taken as a shining example. Of all the men in this world he would have seemed to be the last to have taken to himself a wife. Yet, I give you my word, this is exactly what happened. Quarrelsome, elderly, and possessing none of the domestic virtues save inordinate wealth, he made the queerest bridegroom that ever mortal man set eyes on. The bride was, perhaps, having regard to her character, as great an anomaly as himself. She was twenty-five years of age, pretty in a Dutch doll style, frivolous to a degree, and for the reason that she had never known what it was

to have more than a hundred dollars a year to spend (she had been a governess), was feverishly anxious to dip her square-tipped fingers into his money-bags. How or where they met nobody knows, or will ever know, but that she must have possessed some sort of fascination for him there can be no doubt, since Silas was undeniably attracted and for the further reason that he married her—he, the man who had scarcely spoken a hundred civil words to a woman in his life. The history of their love affair and marriage will, as I have said, never be known; it is nevertheless certain that, after a month of conjugal bliss, they separated.

Seeing that he must make the best of a bad bargain, he took a house for her at Newport, and allowed her a large income, which she spent as became the wife of the great Silas Webber. He must still have retained some sort of affection, or at least of liking, for her, for the reason that he occasionally went to see her. Then a son was born to them, and I should say, for the only time in his life, Silas showed signs of emotion. I have heard from people, who had it from the nurse, that on the first occasion that he saw the child, she

thought he was going to have a fit. Now he had an heir to inherit his millions. It was typical of him, however, that it made no change in his own life. He still lived apart from his wife, though, perhaps for the boy's sake, he certainly treated her with more consideration than he had been wont to do hitherto.

And all this time his personal expenses did not exceed a couple of thousand dollars a year. He gave nothing to charity, he did not entertain, for he had no friends—save those who were attached to him in business, and who dared not quarrel with him. He dressed as he had done when he entered Mr. Gosford's employment, that is to say in as cheap a suit as was compatible with respectability. His hat was his only peculiar feature, and that was broad brimmed and not unlike the head-dress worn by the Quaker of half a century ago. The years rolled by, and each one added to his millions. By this time he must have been one of the richest men in the world, but still he was far from being satisfied. It was not the money he cared for, I will give him that credit; it was for the power it gave him that he valued it.

Like the Great Alexander, he was always on the

lookout for fresh worlds to conquer. Then an idea occurred to him, an idea of such magnitude that even his colossal mind was for a time overwhelmed by it. For weeks he pondered over it, weighing the pros and cons, debating the side issues, and counting the chances that might militate against success. With his reputation, he could not afford a failure. At last he arrived at an understanding of the matter, and felt that the time had come for action. He had long since realised that the scheme was too big even for him to tackle single-handed, so he looked about him for three men upon whom he could rely, and yet who would be willing to subordinate themselves to him. At last he made his choice. They were men of enormous wealth and excellent business talents; what was more, they entertained a keen admiration for himself. It is quite true that in this world of ours nothing succeeds like success.

Silas, having made up his mind, called upon them separately, and, under pledge of secrecy, revealed what was in his mind. Each was staggered, as he himself had been, by the magnitude and audacity of the scheme, and each at first refused to believe that such a thing could be possible. But

Silas, whose tongue was one that would wile a bird off its perch, soon managed to persuade them that it was not as impracticable as it appeared at first glance; provided always, and this he repeatedly impressed upon them, not a word was said to any living soul upon the subject. Finally, he pointed out to them the good he had done them in allowing them to participate, and in order to sustain his character, wound up with this significant tag, "but mark you this, if you don't trust to me and do what I tell you, or if you try to get playin' with me, by the Lord Harry I'll bust you as I would a Joy bird's egg. You know me, my name's Silas J. Webber, and don't you forget it."

Within a week, for there was no time to lose, the whole affair was settled, and Silas was on his way to Europe to bring matters to a head. During the voyage he kept himself very much to himself, growled at the richness of the food, refused to join the whist-tables, for he never gambled save in his own big way, and was as unpopular on board as he was ashore. His only extravagance was in taking a cabin for himself. He had no desire for a companion, and I doubt very much whether any



one would have cared to share one with him. In this cabin he would sit half the day, making notes and brooding over the scheme that was the reason of his being there at all. That was his own idea of enjoyment.

At last Liverpool was reached, and for the first time in his life he stood on English soil. He was not affected by the thought as so many of his countrymen are. He did not tell himself that this was the land from which his forefathers had sailed to colonise his own great country. He could scarcely have done that, since his grandfather, on his mother's side, was a German Jew and his mother again of Dutch extraction. No! he was not affected. He grumbled at the food set before him at his hotel, and emphatically denounced the railway accommodation, which he half thought of buying up and running on the American principle. By the time he reached London he felt as if he had a personal grudge against the British Empire, which he intended to pay off as soon as possible.

On reaching the Great City, he drove to a quiet hotel off the Strand, and settled himself in there. Next morning he made his way to the offices of one of the magnates, whom he had resolved to sound first

That gentleman, a portly personage with a bow-window presence and a massive gold watch chain, could scarcely believe that the commonplace, almost uninteresting man, with whom he shook hands was the world-famous multi-millionaire, Silas Webber. A few minutes conversation, however, was sufficient to convince him of that fact. Silas metaphorically ran the rule over him, turned him inside out to see what he was made of, and came to the conclusion that he would not serve his purpose. He discarded him from that moment, regardless of the fact that the other had once been Lord Mayor.

"I hope I shall have the pleasure of seeing you again, my dear sir," remarked the City magnate, who accompanied him into the street. "Perhaps I could induce you to dine with me at my club."

"I never dine out," replied Silas, ungraciously. "I've too much to do. I can't afford to dander around like you folk do. Besides, high feedin' don't agree with me."

Leaving the City, he drove back to his hotel, lunched on bread and cheese, and thought over the interview of the morning.

It was a pity that he did not hear a remark made by the manager to the head book-keeper.

"I can't make out that old fellow in Number 34," said that functionary. "He don't spend more than he can help. Let's hope he'll be able to settle his bill—for he's got no luggage to speak of, the chambermaid tells me."

Possibly this speech might have tickled the Man of Business!

## CHAPTER VIII

YOU, my gentle reader, are doubtless wondering by this time what possible connection there can be between the life and adventures of the American Millionaire, Silas J. Webber, and those of John Drummond, House and Estate Agent of a small town on the river Thames. If you will bear with me patiently, this is, of course, always provided you care to read on, I will endeavour to show you. What is more, I venture to hope that you will not find the history unentertaining. Before returning to Drummond and his beautiful Countess, it is necessary that I should continue through one more chapter to follow the doings of the inexorable Webber.

On the day following that upon which he paid his visit to the office of the City Magnate, Silas, according to custom, rose early. It was impossible

for him to live, abed, his youthful training had militated against it. He, therefore, rose and went for a walk along the Embankment. It was not yet six o'clock, and an exquisite morning. As yet there was but little traffic along that splendid thoroughfare, though the river, as usual, was full of life. He walked slowly along, thinking of many things, and among others, of the boy whom in reality he loved so fondly, and yet whom he would not allow to see it. Suddenly he became conscious of a feeling of deathly faintness; the world swam before his eyes, a choking sensation seized him, and he felt himself falling through space. He clutched at the balustrading of the Embankment to save himself, and missed it. He would have measured his length upon the pavement had not strong arms seized him and held him up.

"It's all right, my man," said a deep voice. "You'll be better in a minute. Just keep quiet and don't worry yourself. I've got you." Then after a pause, "Don't be afraid. You've had a bit of a faint, that's all. What you want is a good square meal to set you right. I've been that way myself."

After a few minutes Silas began to feel something like himself once more. He put his back

against the parapet and took long breaths to fill his lungs. It was then that he recognised that his friend in need was a policeman, and a large one at that. He was also a man of a most benevolent countenance.

"What do you think is the matter with me?" he asked at length. "I've never felt like this before."

"Lor' bless you," the Constable replied, soothingly. "I've seen dozens, 'undreds I might say, like it afore. I can tell you what it is. It's a h'empty stomach. You take it from me. You've been a 'sleeping' out, and I suppose as how you haven't had a decent meal these few days past. In the morning you feels a bit shortish like, and down you goes. Now look here, I'm not a toff, but I can spare a bob for a chap that's 'ard up. Here it is! (He held up a shilling). "Get along and 'ave a square meal. Sausages and mashed is what I rec'a-mends. It'll fill yer out, and, take my word for it, it'll make a new man of yer."

It may have been instinct, it may have been something else, that made Silas take the shilling which the kindly Constable had offered him. At any-rate, he pocketed it. Then in a feeble voice, very unlike his own, he asked him to call a cab.

"Cab is it?" said the other in some surprise. "And what do you want with a cab?"

"I can't walk," he faltered, giving a lurch forward as he spoke. "I shall spend your shilling on a cab. Get me one, for Heaven's sake."

The constable went off in search of a cab, leaving the other still propped up against the parapet. While he was absent, Silas was occupied fumbling in his pocket. At last he managed to fish up his note-case, and after a considerable amount of difficulty to produce something from it. A few minutes later the policeman returned with a hansom, to find his protégé much as he had left him. He helped him into the vehicle, and then enquired, with a suspicion of sarcasm, where he wished to be driven to.

"Tell him to drive me into the Strand," said Silas. "I'll get something to eat there." Then, leaning out of the vehicle, he offered his hand to his benefactor. It contained a small square of paper. "Try that," he said, "and see how it agrees with your constitution. Go on, hackman, I'm in a hurry. I'll tell you where to drive to when we're in the Strand."

The man whipped up his horse, and a few moments later they had vanished round the corner

and were driving in the direction of the thoroughfare in question.

It was only when they had disappeared from view that the policeman examined what he held in his hand. To his amazement it was a Bank of England Note for Ten Pounds!

"And I thought he was down on his luck," he muttered.

When Silas reached his hotel once more, he went straight to his room and laid himself down upon his bed. He still felt weak and faint, for the attack had been a sharp one. He had never known a day's illness in his life, and this sudden collapse worried him exceedingly.

"If I feel any more of it, I'll see a doctor and tell him to put me right," he said to himself. "I can't afford to be ill just now."

He did not know that he was even worse than he supposed.

During the morning he made several business calls, and, though still not quite himself, he felt better. By this time he was sure that it had been only a fit of indigestion, and that, if he were more careful as to his diet, it would not occur again. That night he left for Paris.

"What's the use of monkeyin' around here?"



he growled, "It takes 'em a week to make up their minds, and a month to do what I'd do in a day. I'll see what the Frenchies have to say for themselves. The Britishers can come on later."

With this amiable object in view he set off for Dover and caught the night mail for Paris. It was by no means a pleasant crossing, a nasty choppy sea was running, and the boat pitched and tossed in a highly unpleasant manner. Fortunately for Silas he was a good sailor, but the majority of the passengers were not so lucky, and dismal indeed were the noises that reached his ears from several of the cabins. At last, and none too soon, they reached Calais and took the train for Paris. By the time he reached that city, Silas felt that he had had enough travelling for a time. He still felt curiously out of sorts, and, if the truth must be confessed, it did not improve his temper. He was even more difficult to please than in London.

He did not go out that morning, but remained, writing letters, in his room. In the afternoon he went for a stroll, "just to get the lay of the country," as he expressed it. Out of doors it was warm and oppressive, with a suspicion of thunder in the air. For this reason he did not hurry himself, but walked leisurely along, his observant eyes taking

in everything as he went. Among other people whom he encountered was a sprucely dressed, gentlemanly-looking man, with grey hair and a waxed grey moustache. Though he did not know it, that gentleman's name was Dexter. Indeed it is very probable that, even if he had known it, he would not have cared very much, and yet, strange are the chances of this mortal existence, that self-same individual was destined to play a part second to none in the drama of his life.

As Mr. Webber strolled along the Boulevard, leaning rather more heavily upon his stick than was his custom, Mr. Dexter sauntered slowly after him, always keeping at a respectful distance in order that it might not be supposed that he was following him. When one stopped to look into a shop window, the other stopped too, and appeared to be taking a vast interest in the street traffic. Perhaps it was only natural that they should be attracted to each other, seeing that the same procedure had been followed in London, and that they had crossed the Channel and journeyed to Paris together.

At last, feeling that he had done enough walking for one afternoon, which by the way was unusual with him, Mr. Webber decided to return to his

hotel. He immediately faced about and retraced his steps, whereupon the unobtrusive Mr. Dexter found something to interest him in the jeweller's window before which he was standing. When the millionaire had passed, the pursuit was taken up again, not to be dropped until the object of it had entered the building where he was staying. Then Mr. Dexter lit a fresh cigar, chuckled, and hailing a fiacre, drove off in the opposite direction.

"It's deuced risky," he muttered, "but if we can bring it off it will pay better than a gold mine. He did me once but, by Jove, he'll find that I'm too good for him now."

From this it may be inferred that he and Mr. Webber had had business transactions together in the past; what they were who can say? One thing, however, was quite certain, and that was the fact that Dexter had waited some time for his revenge. Perhaps he thought it would be all the sweeter when it came!

At the corner of a street he stopped the cab and alighted. Having paid the man, he strode briskly along the pavement, swinging his cane and humming a tune as he walked. He was in excellent spirits, and he had no desire to conceal the fact. Arriving at a certain house, he nodded to the

*Concierge* and enquired if Madame were at home? Monsieur was informed that she was, whereupon he ran nimbly up the stairs, proving thereby that, although upwards of fifty years of age, he had lost none of his old agility.

Arriving at the second floor, he knocked at a certain door, and on receiving permission to enter, did so. It was a charming apartment, and furnished in the latest Parisian fashion. Everything was in perfect taste, but the most beautiful ornament in the room was the lady who reclined upon the settee in the window, and who held a novel in her hand. As Dexter entered she gave a little laugh. It was a suggestive little laugh and might have been taken in several ways. Dexter, however, did not seem to attach much importance to it. He placed his hat and stick on a chair, without a word, and then approached her. Why he should have stroked her cheek, goodness alone knows. It is a fact, however, that he did so. I wonder what John Drummond would have said, could he have seen it. For the lady upon the settee, as doubtless you have guessed, was none other than his fair client, the mysterious Countess Londa, who at that moment was supposed to be

nursing her sick friend and ex-companion in London.

"Well?" she enquired, "what have you done? Have you seen him? You've been a long time away."

"I've not only seen him," was the man's reply, "but I've been following him for the best part of the afternoon. Strange to relate, I cannot help feeling that the old fellow's getting a bit feeble. He leaned upon his stick more than he ought to have done, and his ugly old face looks paler than it did in London."

"It will be paler still before we've done with him," remarked the lady, with a vindictiveness that was not at all in keeping with the sweetness she had shown to Drummond when she had called upon him. "Have you done all I told you? There must be no mistakes, remember."

"Everything is ready, and the first time he ventures out after dark we'll have him. I had to pay Pierre and Antoine more than I expected, but under the circumstances I could not help myself. They are the only men we can rely on to do the work and to keep their mouths shut afterwards."

"You are sure we can rely on them?" asked the lady, who was languidly fanning herself.

"As sure as I am of anything," the other replied. "They dare not play me false. I know too much about them, and, what is more, they are aware that I know it. No, we need have no fear of them. What we have to think of now is a way of drawing that old badger out of his hole. He does not know a soul in Paris, and he's not to be reached by feminine temptation."

"We must think of something. It should not be a very difficult matter. After all, he's only a man."

"Yes, and a mighty suspicious one too. Don't you make any mistake about that. You don't know him as well as I do. He's as wily as a lynx, and a fair tiger-cat for fighting."

"Never mind, we'll clip his claws before we've done with him. Don't be afraid!"

"It's all very well to say we shall, but how do you propose to do it?"

"Have you ever known me fail in anything I have undertaken?"

"Well, now I come to think of it, I don't know that I have." But this bit of business is somewhat out of the common. I don't mind admitting that I'm half afraid of it myself. That's a fairly large order, isn't it?"

"You afraid?" she asked, as if she were surprised at such an admission. "I thought your nerves were equal to anything?"

"So they are as a rule, but as I said just now, this is out of the common," he answered. "Have you allowed it to be understood here that you are daily expecting your father from America?"

"Yes. I have even taken the precaution of having a room prepared for him."

"That's the idea. Keep it up. As the conjurers say, 'it will help the illusion.' Well, now I must go, I've a hundred and one things to see to. *Au revoir* until we meet at dinner."

Next day Silas felt himself once more. During the morning he made two important calls, and in quite his old business spirit. Both were eminently satisfactory, and he returned to his hotel in the best of spirits. He cabled to New York that matters were progressing excellently, and gave his partners certain instructions which were to be carried out immediately.

"I'll teach these old countries a lesson before I've done with them," he said to himself, with a chuckle.

But alas for his schemes, he did not know that

Nemesis was lying in wait for him round the corner in the well-groomed shape of Mr. Dexter.

After lunch he smoked a cigar in the verandah of the hotel, and reflected on the business of the morning. My reader, you must forgive my prolixity, but I cannot help thinking that every detail connected with the wretched man's life on that particular day is worth recording. In his own heart he was plotting, as he had done all his life, to bring about the ruin of his fellow-man, and doing it, though he did not know it, on the very threshold of Eternity.

• "I've fairly got 'em cornered," he murmured with gusto. "They can't get out and they must agree to my terms, whether they like it or not. And the best of it is, that those galoots in N' York are in it up to their necks, and they can't move hand or foot without me. I've the information, and they've got the responsibility."

That was the sort of joke he could appreciate, and his eyes twinkled wickedly.

Having finished his cigar and his meditations, he thought he would go for a stroll. He therefore donned his hat and passed into the street. He did not notice, or if he did so, did not bestow much attention upon an exceedingly attractive young



widow who was standing, as if waiting for someone, some fifty or sixty yards further up the street. He crossed over and set off in very much the same direction that he had followed on the previous afternoon. A close observer might have noticed that the pretty widow followed him, regulating her pace according to his. It was only when they reached the more crowded quarter that she drew nearer him. As I have said, she was exceedingly attractive, and many heads were turned to look at her. She seemed, however, to be unconscious of their admiration. The fact was she found it took all her time to keep the man in view, so crowded was the pavement. At last she was so close to him that it might even have been thought that she was his companion. For upwards of a hundred yards they continued to progress side by side.

Suddenly Silas began to feel the same awful faintness that he had experienced that morning on the Embankment. The world turned black before his eyes, and he felt himself falling through space. Instinctively he clutched at the person nearest him, and that person chanced to be the pretty widow, who had been following him since he left the hotel. She seized him, and half-dragged, half-led him, towards the café, they happened to be in front of at

the time. Before she could place him in a chair, his head had fallen back and he was unconscious. This was not at all what she had expected, and for a moment she scarcely knew how to act. Then, in a flash, enlightenment came to her, and she was equal to the situation.

Turning to the people about her, she implored someone to procure her a cab quickly as possible.

"My father is dying," she cried piteously to the little crowd that surrounded her. "I must take him home as soon as possible."

Almost before the words had left her mouth half-a-dozen men had gone from the café in search of a vehicle. She could have had a hundred cabs, and all the fares paid, had she wanted them. Her solicitude for her father is remembered, I believe, to this day. No daughter could have been more thoughtful for her beloved parent's welfare. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she hung over him, chafing his hands and gazing lovingly into his face. Here, at least, was a model of daughterly devotion.

"Can nothing be done?" she asked, tremblingly, looking up at the people about her. "Oh, let me take him home. Help me! Please help me!"

Supported by the owner of the café, and a bystander, the manimate figure of the millionaire was

conducted to the cab and placed in it. The pretty widow stepped in beside him, and after she had again thanked those who had helped her, they drove away. It was only when they were out of earshot of the café that she gave the driver the address. Silas was still unconscious. Destiny had arranged matters for him in a right royal fashion.

At last they reached her house, and, as it happened, only just in time, for Dexter was in the act of leaving it. He stared into the cab in amazement.

"What the deuce has happened?" he asked, as soon as he could find words. "Have you gone mad?"

"Don't stand there asking questions," replied the lady with a fair amount of asperity. "Help me to get him into the house. There's not a moment to lose. I've had a terrible time."

Dexter took the hint, and with the assistance of the *Concierge* and a loafer, carried the unconscious millionaire into the house and upstairs to the room which the lady had prepared for her expected parent. That he, Dexter, was far from feeling easy in his mind, was evidenced by the fact that, when he had deposited his burden upon the bed, he went out on to the landing and swore volubly.

"It's Fate," he said, "and Fate's always against me! He'll die just at the time that we most want him to live, and, after all, the money we've spent on this business, we shall be euchred in the end. It's what I call dashed hard luck; I'm hanged if it isn't!"

He would have gone on lamenting his bad luck, but at that moment the lady looked out from the bedroom and bade him send someone for a doctor.

"He is dying," she said, "See that a medical man comes at once, or it may be too late."

Dexter, without pausing to consider, flew downstairs and despatched the *Concierge* at express speed for a medical man.

"Bring him back with you, and you shall have five francs for your trouble," he observed. "Madame is in despair about her father. Unless we can procure a doctor at once he will die."

Without waiting to be told twice, the man dashed off in search of a medical man, and Dexter made his way upstairs once more. Silas was still unconscious.

"This is a nice end to all our schemes," he said. "All our trouble has been for nothing."

"On the contrary," she answered, "we could not have been more fortunate. We have succeeded

beyond my utmost expectations. Look at that!"

As she spoke she handed the other a small packet of papers which she had taken from the sick man's pocket. Dexter went to the window and examined it carefully. Then an exclamation of astonishment escaped him.

"Good gracious!" he said. "This is something like a find. But it will require a lot of looking into. We shall have to be careful as to what we are doing."

"In the meantime remember he is my father and that, as a dutiful daughter, I am naturally much concerned about him."

A few minutes later the doctor made his appearance. He overhauled the patient carefully and shook his head.

"I regret very much being compelled to say that I can do nothing," was his verdict, after he had completed his examination. "He is sinking fast."

"Oh, don't say that," cried the lady. "Don't say that! Can nothing be done for him? For pity's sake do something!"

The doctor was visibly affected, as she had intended he should be. He would have given something to have been able to offer some comfort, but he knew of none. The man on the bed was

dying, and a very few minutes would see the end of him.

"Alas! I can do nothing further," he said. "It hurts me to have to say so, but I am powerless. He is beyond all human help."

Even as he spoke the end came. Silas Webber's career was finished. His millions were of no further use to him.

## CHAPTER IX

I SHOULD imagine that there can be few people who do not remember the sensation that greeted the news that the famous American Millionaire, Silas Webber, had disappeared. The papers laid themselves out to do the subject justice, and they certainly succeeded. Every sort of explanation of the mystery that surrounded the case was offered, but it seemed impossible to solve it. Mr. Webber, so the hall porter deposed, had left the hotel precisely at half-past three. He appeared, so far as the man could judge, to be in the best of health and spirits, and had informed him that, should anyone call to see him, he would be back by five o'clock. From that moment he had never set eyes on him again. Two of the gentlemen with whom he had done business that morning stated that they had noticed nothing

unusual in his manner. Indeed, he had made an appointment with one of them for the following morning, and as there were gigantic interests involved, he felt sure Mr. Webber would not have failed to put in an appearance had he been in a position to do so. So far as was known, the gentleman in question had no personal friends in Paris. He was also a man of the strictest sobriety. Taken altogether, the case was an inexplicable one. The Seine was dragged in vain; the low quarters of Paris were searched through and through by detectives, without any satisfactory result; that most gruesome of all places, The Morgue, knew him not, while the rewards that were offered only produced a series of impostors, whose information was as absurd as it was unreliable.

In America, and New York in particular, the news was at first received with incredulity, and when it was confirmed, with something very nearly approaching consternation. His interests were so vast, his controlling power so great, that even strong men trembled when they thought of what might be the result if he did not re-appear. As for his three partners in the latest venture, they were like men distraught. Silas had held them in the hollow of his hand, and, without him, they were



powerless. Moreover he had all the papers connected with the matter in his possession, and it was of the utmost importance that they should not fall into other hands. Mr. Septimus G. Bull and Mr. Pète von Vandergraff shook their heads over the matter and sighed heavily as they did so.

"He must be found at any cost," said the former. "If I had thought this was going to happen, I'd have seen him lynched before I'd have gone into it with him."

He spoke as if the missing man had done him a personal injury, instead of having given him the biggest opportunity he had ever known in his life of making a fortune. Mr. Vandergraff agreed with him that something must be done—but what that something was to be, neither of them seemed to be able to tell. If the American Ambassador in Paris forgets that time I shall be more than surprised. His position was certainly no sinecure. It seemed as if Silas J. Webber were the most important individual on earth—every one wanted to know about him—princes and presidents made polite enquiries, while police, pressmen, financiers, and obscure American citizens all clamoured for interviews and speculated as to the whereabouts of the missing man.

In London the sensation created was scarcely less than in New York and Paris. The papers were eagerly bought up, and the case was the topic of the hour. Never since the Tichborne trial had so many theories been brought forward to account for his mysterious disappearance. Some believed it to be a case of murder, others that he had been kidnapped and was being kept a prisoner in order that his friends might ransom him, while another section declared emphatically that he had important reasons for keeping out of the way, and that, instead of being as rich as was supposed, he was in reality on the verge of bankruptcy. As is usual in such affairs, men came forward who professed to have seen him in various cities. One had met him in Algiers, another had stayed in the same hotel with him in Vienna. One thing, however, was quite certain, wherever they had seen him they found it impossible to earn the reward by laying their hands upon him.

Like so many thousand other people, John Drummond followed the case in the newspapers with great interest, little dreaming what an important part he had himself played in it.

One day he chanced to meet Dexter in the street, and they strolled along together.

"I haven't seen you since your return from Paris," said John. "I hope you had a good time?"

"Excellent," Dexter replied. "The only regret I have is that I was compelled to return so soon. However, beggars can't be choosers, and I suppose I must be thankful for the little holiday I did have. The Idle Apprentice feels even more inclined to be idle than he did before."

"By the way," said Drummond presently, "how about the disappearance of the American Millionaire? You must have been in Paris when it happened. It has been the sensation of the season."

"I am tired of the very sound of the man's name," said Dexter. "In Paris they can talk of nothing else. They chatter about it wherever you go—in the streets, in the cafés, between the acts at the theatres, and I believe they'd do it in the churches, if the priests would let them. It quite got on my nerves."

"And what is your theory? Has the man been murdered, do you think; or is he simply keeping out of the way for reasons of his own, as some people suggest?"

Dexter gave a little wave of his hand as much as to say, "well, if you will talk about it, I suppose

I must let you, but the subject bores me consumedly."

"Not being in the man's confidence I cannot tell you what has become of him," he said. "It seems to me that too much importance has been attached to the whole affair. If the fellow had not been a millionaire, it would have died a natural death by this time—and so probably would he."

He spoke so sharply that John glanced at him with some surprise. It was not like the usually placid Dexter to allow his temper to be ruffled by so trivial a matter. The subject was then allowed to drop, and at the corner of the street they separated, Dexter turning off in the direction of his lodgings, Drummond proceeding along the Market Place towards his office.

But though Dexter had dropped a hint that he had to get back to his own abode, he did not in reality go there. He gave Drummond time to pass out of sight, and then turned off into a side street. He strode jauntily along, swinging his cane as he walked, and humming a little French *chanson*, as if he were without a care in the world. In something like half an hour he might have been observed ringing the bell at The Cedars. In reply to his enquiry he was informed that Mrs. Ferrars

was at home. He immediately followed the servant into the house and down the corridor to the drawing-room. The lady he had come to see was certainly not of punctual habits, for nearly a quarter of an hour went by before she made her appearance.

"I could not come before," she said, by way of apology, as she dropped into a chair. "That Conyers girl will insist on discussing the thousand and one household worries with me. It bores me to death, but I have to do it to keep up appearances."

"I can't see why you engaged the girl at all," said Dexter, taking the cigarette she offered him. "It only adds to the risk, and the deuce knows there's enough of that already."

"My reason for engaging her should be obvious to you," retorted the other. "In the first place she looks after the house, which I couldn't do myself. Then again she attends to the tradesmen, does the shopping, and pays the bills, so that I don't have to appear upon the scene at all—which, situated as I am, is another and very necessary precaution, as I think you will admit. And now don't let us talk any more of her. What have you come to see me about? I thought it was

against the rules for you, to make your appearance here in the daytime!"

"I know that," was his answer, "but I have received a cable from America this morning, and I thought you ought to see it at once." Hence my presence."

He produced the message in question from his pocket and handed it to her.

"Careless man," she said, sharply. "It won't be your fault if the whole scheme doesn't fall through, and we find ourselves standing in the dock of the police-court with the prospect of ten years to cheer us up."

"What have I done wrong now?" he asked, with a nervousness that would have surprised John Drummond, had he seen it. "You find fault with everything I do. It takes the heart out of a man."

"To begin with," she said, with a touch of scorn, "this message is addressed to you in your own name; again it is wired to you in this town, when you might very well have told him to send it to the address in London. What's more, you are carrying it about with you! You might drop it, and the element of chance that so often rules these things might very well arrange that it should fall into the hands of some suspicious person, whose

wits would be set going, with the result that eventually the police would be given a clue that would end in our being captured. I'll make a copy of this, and then it can be destroyed. It's the only safe way."

She accordingly went to her writing-table on the other side of the room and sat down. The message she copied was, as I have already said, addressed to Dexter, and ran as follows:—

"Have opened negotiations with advertisement. Fish-bite—Head man leaves next boat."

The telegram was signed "Helston," and had been despatched from the general office.

Having completed her task, the copy of the message, which was minus an address, the signature, and Dexter's name, was carefully locked up in a drawer of the table, after which she lit a candle and proceeded to burn the original, scattering the ashes out of the window when she had done so.

"So much for that," she said. "Now let us talk business. I have a lot to say to you."

She returned to her former chair, and taking up a fan, for the morning was a warm one, began to

leisurely fan herself. Her brow was puckered with thought and her eyes were half closed.

"I hope Helston inserted that advertisement as I wrote it," she said at last—but without looking at him.

"You may be sure of that," Dexter replied. "His instructions were to the effect that he was to be sure to do so."

"By the head man, he, of course, means Vandergraff. What boat leaves New York to-morrow?"

"A Hamburg-American. I can't remember the name."

"Then he will travel by it. He should reach Plymouth next Thursday—a week from to-morrow. Now the question for our consideration is who is to interview him? Neither you nor I must appear in it. I have come to that conclusion."

"Then you have changed your mind?" said Dexter. "I'm glad to hear it. The old plan was too risky. What have you to propose now?"

"Employing someone else," she answered. "Someone who has no interest in the matter, and who can be trusted to do as he is told, without asking questions, or prying into things that don't concern him."



“A remarkable person! Do you happen to know one who answers the description?”

“I think so,” said the lady, “and what is more, he is a friend of yours”

“Then I can guess his name. You refer to John Drammond.”

She nodded.

“The very man,” she said “He should answer the purpose admirably.”

“But how do you suppose you are going to persuade him to do it?” continued Dexter. “I fancy you will find him rather a difficult man to deal with. When he chooses he can be as stubborn as a mule. Unfortunately, he has a strange predilection for honest dealings”

“Leave him to me. I think I can manage him. It would be strange if I could not. He will not be the first man whom I have induced to do things that other people thought impossible.”

“Well, go on and prosper. I hope you may succeed. But I must confess that I am doubtful. One thing is certain, as I said just now, he is honest enough, whatever else he may be. You will have to be pretty quick about it.”

“You had better leave the matter entirely in

my hands," she remarked. "If you thrust in your oar you may spoil everything"

"Then my oar shall not be thrust in, my dear, and I have the utmost confidence in you. By the way, you are quite sure, I suppose, that Miss Conyers does not suspect what—well, shall we say, what is locked up in that disused cellar"

"Quite sure. Why should she? I keep the key myself, and as we brought it in in the middle of the night, when she was fast asleep, she could not possibly know anything about it"

"You should give orders that no one is to go down into either cellar under any pretext whatsoever," said Dexter

She gave a little contemptuous laugh. It was very evident that she did not think much of his advice

"What would the effect be?" she enquired. "Why, that they'd seize the first opportunity to go down and explore. Really, Richard, there are times when I lose patience with you. How you would manage this affair, if left to yourself, I cannot for the life of me imagine."

"Nor I," he replied, with perfect good humour. "As I said before, you are a clever woman, and no one knows that better than myself. But for

goodness sake, let's be done with this as soon as possible and get out of England. I am afraid my nerves are not what they used to be. The affair has created such a sensation that I swear I experience a chill every time I pass a policeman. I believe if one were to stop and speak to me I should fall down in a fit."

"You are growing old, my dear Richard. That's the real meaning of it. You must brace yourself up. The half million dollars which will be your share of this transaction should prove an excellent tonic. And now you had better go. Miss Conyers will be back soon, and I don't want her to find you here. You may come to morrow night."

"Why not to-night?" he asked. "I don't see much of you."

"Because I don't want you to be here too often," she answered. "You don't know what people may think or say, and it is necessary that we should be as little before the public eye as possible just now."

"Very well," he said. "I obey you in that, as in everything else. Good-bye."

Strange though it may appear, she raised no objection when he took her in his arms and kissed

her. This fact alone would have given John Drummond food for reflection.

When he had gone, the lady stood for a moment looking out into the garden with eyes that seemed to see nothing.

"My friend," she muttered, "I wonder whether you really care for me as much as you say you do? Or is it the money you are thinking of? Well, Time will prove—but Heaven help you if you try to play me false."

While this curious interview had been proceeding, another had been taking place on the opposite side of the town. As John Drummond made his way back to his office after his walk with Dexter, he suddenly found himself face to face with no less a person than Miss Conyers. Instead of passing him, she stopped and held out her hand with that frankness which was so characteristic of her.

"Good morning, Mr. Drummond," she said. "I am looking for a shop kept by a man named Milford. Can you direct me to it?"

"Milford, the fishmonger?" asked John, who jumped at the opportunity that she offered him. "I will show you the way with the greatest of pleasure."

"But I must not trespass upon your good nature,"

replied the girl. "If you will direct me, I am sure I shall be able to find it."

"No, you must really let me show it to you," he remarked. "It is not very far from here."

He turned, and they walked across the Market Place together. On the way he enquired after Mrs. Ferrars.

"She complained of a slight headache this morning," answered his companion, "and did not get up to breakfast. I don't think, Mr. Drummond, that she goes out enough. She has not been past the gates since she returned from London. That does not seem right in one who is so young and beautiful. I think she must have known some great sorrow in her life—for sometimes, when she is not observed, she seems to fall into fits of melancholy, from which I know she finds it difficult to rouse herself. Surely that should not be!"

John agreed with her on this point—as he felt he would have been ready to do on any other. He has since confessed to me that he thought her the most charming girl he had ever met in his life. The Countess was more beautiful and, in a sense, perhaps more fascinating, but Madeleine Conyers was so honest and straightforward, such an excellent specimen of English womanhood that it was

impossible not to be attracted by her. John felt that he should like his mother to know her, and this exactly expresses the case.

The same thought had never occurred to him where the other was concerned.

When they reached the shop which he had promised to show her, he bade her good-bye and went back to his office, feeling that the old town had increased in beauty merely because of her presence in it. I gather from this fact that this hitherto scarcely impressionable young man was in a very fair way to fall in love.

That afternoon, on his return from lunch, Nicodemus handed him a note which had arrived during his absence. One glance at the handwriting on the envelope told him whence it came.

"The Countess again," he said to himself. "I wonder what she wants with me this time?"

It proved to be merely a short note, asking him whether it would be possible for him to make it convenient to call at the house that afternoon. It concluded with this paragraph:—

"I am afraid I trespass sadly on your time, but you were once kind enough to say, if at any time you could help me, you would be very glad to do so. I stand in sore need of advice now, and I know

of no one better calculated to give it than yourself."

"You pay me a very pretty compliment, my lady," said John with a smile. "But I know you too well by this time, to put too much faith in all you say. However, I'll call upon you and find out what it is you want of me."

I am not quite sure that he was not influenced in some small degree by the knowledge that he would probably see something more of Miss Conyers, if he went. That, however, has nothing to do with the story, or at least with this particular part of it.

Within an hour of his receipt of the note he entered the drawing-room at The Cedars, to find the Countess engaged upon some embroidery by the window. She came forward to greet him, and John thought, as he shook hands with her, that, never since he had known her, had she looked more beautiful or more dangerous.

"It is so good of you to come so quickly," she said, as if she took it for granted that he would come in any case. "You see, I remembered your kind offer to help me, if ever I should stand in need of it. Was I wrong?"

"No, you were quite right," he answered. "As I said before, I shall be very glad to help you, if

I can. But I am not very confident of my own powers."

"In this case I have no doubt you can render me a very signal service without taxing yourself too much. Do sit down and let me tell you all about it. It will ease my mind to pour my troubles into a sympathetic ear. I have been brooding over it for the last two or three days, until my nerves seem quite unstrung."

She looked so sad at the moment that John was touched with compassion.

"Please do not recall any unpleasant memories," he said. "May it not be possible for me to help you without that?"

"I fear not," she answered, with a sigh. "Besides, I have a good reason for wishing to tell you everything."

"And that reason?"

"Is that I want to be perfectly honest with you. Few women have known so much sorrow as I, and few have ever found themselves in such a position of danger as I am in at the present moment."

In her last remark she was for once telling the truth, though scarcely in the way she intended.



"Do you mean that you are really in personal danger?" asked John in surprise.

It seemed impossible that this beautiful creature seated before him, her embroidery in her hand, could be going in fear of her life.

"I am in such danger," she replied, "that I never venture outside these walls. Now you can see why I took this house, and why I lead the lonely life I do."

It struck John that there might be some truth in this, but he wanted to know more before he formed any definite opinion on that head.

"You have not been molested here?" he said.

"No," she answered, "and for the simple reason that no one save yourself is aware of my presence in the neighbourhood."

"Are you quite sure of that?" he asked.

"Quite sure," she replied. "I don't know a soul in the place excepting yourself."

John thought of Dexter, and once more his suspicions were aroused. What could the link between them be?

"And now I must tell you my story," she said, "and you will then be able to say whether you will help me or not. Of course I know that I can rely on your secrecy. I need not ask that question."

For, believe me, the trust I am placing in you is no ordinary one. Should it leak out, I shall be as good as a dead woman."

This was certainly serious enough in all conscience, Drummond thought to himself.

"You may rely on me implicitly," he answered. "I pledge you my word that not a breath of it shall pass my lips. I hope you feel that you can trust me?"

"As I said just now, I *do* trust you, and from the bottom of my heart, and in proof of it I will commence my story."

## CHAPTER X

"To begin with, I might tell you that I was born in a little village a few miles distant from Buda-Pesth, in which city my father was a merchant. He was an Englishman, but had been for many years resident in the country; my mother was a beautiful Hungarian girl of good family. The marriage was in every way a love-match, and was not approved of by her relatives; indeed, the opposition was so strong that, from the day she entered my father's house as his bride, they refused to recognise her existence in any way. In due course I was born, and later on a brother, who died in infancy. Never was a child more loved by its parents than I was—nothing was too good for me, and, until my mother died, when I was twelve years old, no trouble darkened our doors. From that moment, however, a sad change came

over us. My father had been passionately attached to his wife, and for some time it was thought that losing her had affected his reason. He scarcely spoke, preferred always to be alone, and neglected his business to a serious extent. Little more than a year elapsed before he followed her to the grave, and I was left alone. It was then discovered that during the past year my father's business had suffered more than was supposed, partly by his inattention to it, but more by reason of the dishonesty of the cashier, who had succeeded in obtaining large sums by forgery, and who had then fled the country. Nevertheless there remained for me a sum amounting in English money to something like ten thousand pounds. My father's old lawyer was appointed my trustee, and a stricter business man could scarcely have been discovered.

"A few days after my father's funeral, I received a visit from this gentleman. To my surprise he was accompanied by a tall, military-looking man with a stern, but exceedingly handsome face. He proved to be my mother's brother, the man who had quarrelled so fiercely with my father. To cut this part of my story short, I was informed that he had come to take me away from my old home, which, it appeared, was to be sold, when the amount

realised would be added to my fortune. I remember that I was much affected by the prospect. I did not like the look of my uncle, and, worse than all, I could not bear the thought of leaving the home to which, childlike, I was so devotedly attached. However, I had no choice in the matter. Accordingly, next day I bade the dear old Fraulén, who had been my governess from the time that I could read, a weeping farewell, and set off with my uncle for Prague, near which city he owned a considerable estate.

“Of the dreariness of that old castle, in which I was to dwell for upwards of nine long years, I cannot give you any idea. It was the home of my race, but it was also the loneliest place I had ever seen or dreamt of. The servants were for the most part old and invariably cross. My uncle was unmarried, a misanthrope, and scarcely ever left the estate. When he spoke to me it was usually to ask some question concerning my studies, and woe betide me if I made a mistake. I was punished immediately and out of proportion to the offence. I don't think he ever forgot for a moment in all the years that I lived with him, that I was my father's daughter, the child of the man he had hated. Well, the years rolled by, and with them

I grew from girl to woman. With every twelve months my longing to escape from my prison, for prison it certainly was, increased in intensity. The dreary castle, the still drearier woods that enclosed it, were not my idea of the world. Had I known where to go, I believe I should have run away, but as yet I had no money of my own, and, in all the years I had lived with him, my uncle had not given me a penny piece. Indeed it would have been of no use to me, if he had done so, since I could not have spent it.

"It was within three months of my coming into my fortune that the most evil hour of my life arrived. I remember that it was a winter's day, and I had been walking in the woods, dreaming my dreams of the future as was my custom. Dusk had fallen by the time I reached the castle once more. As I crossed the great hall the sound of voices reached me from my uncle's room. He must have heard my step, for he came to the door and called me in. Obedient to his summons, I followed him into the room to find a stranger standing before the fireplace. He was tall and handsome, with black eyes and hair, and a fierce black moustache. His age would probably have been between thirty and thirty-five. My uncle,

who could be the essence of courtesy when he pleased, presented him to me as the Count Londa, whereupon he made me an elaborate bow, and expressed his pleasure at making my acquaintance. What his business was with my uncle I did not know then, though I thought I could hazard a very good guess. At any rate, he remained at the castle for upwards of a week, and during that time I was almost continually in his company. A more fascinating companion no woman could have desired. He had travelled a good deal and had hundreds of amusing stories to tell concerning his adventures in distant lands. I know that I hung upon his words entranced.

"As the time drew near for him to leave, I found myself bitterly regretting his going. I can see now my girlish fancy had endowed him with qualities that he did not possess, nor could ever have possessed. What was worse, he had fascinated me so that I believed myself to be in love with him. Poor little, silly moth that I was, he must have laughed to himself when he saw how soon I fluttered into the flame.

"Three days before his departure he found me walking on the terrace. He approached me and begged me to take a stroll with him. My woman's

instinct told me what was coming, nor was I mistaken for, no sooner had we reached the seclusion of the woods, than he told me of his love for me, vowing that he could not live without me; that, if I would marry him, he would make me such a husband as no woman had ever had before. Alas for me, he certainly did. In answer to his question I tremblingly told him that I loved him, and promised, with my uncle's consent, to become his wife.

" 'Alas, that will not do,' he answered, 'for your uncle would never consent to our union. Indeed he would do all that lay in his power to prevent it. I fear you do not know him as I do.'

"He then went on to tell me something of his business with my uncle. The latter, he said, was in serious monetary difficulties, and it was his unhappy lot to have to come down in order to press him for a settlement of certain affairs.

" 'Had I known that you were here, my love,' he went on, 'I would not have come on such a vulgar errand. But I thank Heaven for bringing me to my good angel—for my good angel you certainly are.'

" 'But if my uncle will not consent, what are we



to do?' I enquired, for I did not see any way out of the difficulty.

"'Would you be brave?' he asked, looking eagerly into my face and speaking in his deep, mysterious voice. 'Could you nerve yourself to fly with me? I would arrange everything, and we could be married in Vienna'

"For a moment I was amazed at the audacity of the idea and declared that I could not think of such a thing. But he had all the subtlety of the Evil One, and can you be surprised that in the end I yielded. We fled together, and at last reached Vienna, where we were married, and I became the Countess Londa—wife of a gambler and a spendthrift, and what was worse still, a member, as I soon discovered, of one of the most dangerous secret societies in Europe. Before we had been married a month, he had anticipated and squandered several thousand pounds of my fortune, and, partly for political reasons, partly by reason of his debts, we were compelled to fly the country. We went to Warsaw, and it was there that I became a member of the society to which he belonged. It was not he who talked me over, but an old man who had suffered cruelly at the hands of the Russian Government. His eloquence worked upon

me to such a degree that I willingly consented to join them in order to further the good work in which I understood they were engaged. However, it was not me but my money that they wanted. Pressure was brought to bear, and I contributed largely to their funds. I have already told you something of my adventures across the Russian frontier, so that I need not enlarge upon them now."

John nodded his head.

"I remember you telling me," he said. "Please go on—you interest me deeply."

"You cannot think how it relieves me to have such a sympathetic listener," she replied. "My burden of troubles seems all the lighter since I have shared it with you. But let me continue. Sad to say I had not been engaged at the work for more than a year before I began to have my suspicions that the aims of the society were not quite as noble, as I had at first supposed them. In many cases its power was used for paying off private scores and for obtaining power over people for no other reason than that of extorting money. I have known some sad things in my life, but never anything like the two years that followed. My husband's love, if he had ever had any for me,

was now quite gone, or even worse than that, for he treated me with the most diabolical cruelty. Picture my position! Tortured by him on one hand, and bitterly regretting my connection with the society on the other, I was driven to the verge of despair. Then my child was born, and, happily for it, died within three months. I felt as if my heart were broken. One night, and quite by accident, I discovered some papers of a desperately incriminating character. Never shall I be able to understand how it was that they were not more carefully guarded. I seized them, and felt that at last I had a weapon that, if necessary, I could use against them. Not only were they incriminating to several high personages, but also, had they fallen into the hands of the Camorristi or Mafia, several of our own leaders would not have escaped with their lives. That was a year ago.

"Scarcely caring whether they caught me or not, I fled across the border, made my way by a circuitous route to Venice, where I took ship and travelled to Egypt, thence to Algiers, and from Algiers by private yacht to England. I hid myself in London in a part of the town where I was scarcely likely to meet any of the foreign conspirators, of whom there are so many in the

Metropolis. What I wanted to find was a house in some quiet suburb where I could hide myself, for a time at least. Through a bookseller in the neighbourhood I ordered copies of all the suburban papers that I could think of. Eventually I decided upon trying this town, came down, saw this house, and then called upon you. I had seen your advertisement in the local journal—hence my visit."

John wondered whether Dexter had had anything to do with it, or whether her story was the true one.

"Now that you have heard this portion of my history," she continued, "you can understand why I was so anxious to obtain a house where my enemies would not be likely to think of looking for me. And yet even here I cannot allay my fears. My foes will do anything in the world to obtain possession of those papers, and, if they find me, I verily believe my life will pay the forfeit. I have received information that they are searching for me everywhere, and night after night, when I retire to rest, it is with a prayer of thankfulness that I am still alive."

"But it is impossible for you to bear this strain for long," said John. "It will kill you. Would it not be possible for you to make terms with them?"

Would they not give up the pursuit if you returned to them the papers that you brought away with you?"

"That is exactly the subject upon which I wish to ask your advice," she answered. "An opportunity has arisen by which I believe it can be accomplished without any undue risk to myself. One of the chiefs of the society sails from America to-morrow, where he has been searching for me, as it was rumoured that I had gone to Chicago. A friend of mine in that country, and who alone knows my address, and whom I can trust as implicitly as I do yourself, communicated with him anonymously, offering, on my behalf, to return the papers, provided he would come to England—pay a considerable sum—in fact the sum that I subscribed to the society, and give a written assurance that I should never again be molested."

"In that case, does it not seem that the matter is to all intents and purposes settled?" said Drummond, who began to wonder why he had been asked to the conference at all.

"I am afraid you do not quite understand the position," she answered. "Cannot you see that it would be impossible for me to appear in the business at all? To write from here would be to let

them know where I am. To post a letter to them would be to run the risk of its miscarrying."

"Then what do you propose to do?" he asked, with natural bewilderment.

"That is exactly the question I wish to discuss with you," she replied for the second time, rising from her chair as she spoke, and crossing the room to the fireplace. She leant her elbow on the mantelpiece and her head upon her hand, and, as John Drummond had to admit, the result was effective. I fancy if you were to question him to-day he would confess, despite other matters, in all his experience he had never met anyone who knew the value of an effective pose as did the Countess Londa.

"Supposing this man comes," she said, "what am I to do? I could not possibly interview him myself. To all intents and purposes that would mean certain death."

Of course John Drummond was a very silly man, but she was aware that it was impossible for her to tell him that. Being a clever woman, she knew that there are times when it becomes imperative to conceal even what is obvious.

"I am afraid as yet I do not understand what I am to do," he remarked. "I seem to have such

a vague knowledge of the situation. You say that they want the papers, and my suggestion is that you should give them to them. You say then that you wish to obtain a return of the contribution you have made to their funds, whereupon I suggest that you should write to the man to that effect, thereupon you declare that that is impossible. Then, if it is impossible, how do you propose to proceed?"

"As I have said twice before, that is the point upon which I desire to be advised by you."

"I fear I cannot advise. I would help you if I could. As it is I am at the end of my resources."

"Could you not help me yourself?" she said, very quietly, looking him in the face as she spoke with an expression which, had he but known it, should have told him that she had already made up her mind.

"I have already promised to do so on several occasions," he answered, "but we seem to be getting no nearer the point. I fear we are playing at cross purposes. You tell me of your trouble and you ask me to assist you, but you will not say in what way I am to do it."

"Because I am half afraid to do so," she replied. "I fear lest you may consider it too much to ask."

"I shall be the best judge of that," he continued.  
"Please go on."

She paused for a moment and looked anxiously at him. It was evident to Drummond that whatever she was, now she was in deadly earnest.

"Mr. Drummond," she said, "what I am going to ask of you is neither more nor less than to take a letter from me to this man. He cannot harm you, as he will not even know your name or where you come from, so that you will be running no practical risk."

For the second time since he had known her, John found himself placed in a decidedly unenviable position. He had pledged himself to help her, but when he did so he had no idea that he would be called upon to act as an intermediary between herself and a highly dangerous secret society. If the story she had told him were true, then she had indeed known suffering such as falls to the lot of few women. If it were not, he might rue the day he had helped her for the rest of his life.

"You hesitate," she said, "and I don't wonder at it. I have no right to ask so much."

Then her head dropped on to her hands, and she began to weep bitterly. John did not know



what to say or do. He could not bear to see her cry like this, and yet he could not see his way to comfort her, except by pledging himself at once to do what she asked of him. A promise which at present he was not inclined to give.

"I do not know what to say to you to cheer you, Countess," he said at last. "The request you have made to me is such a singular one that I could not possibly decide it offhand."

She looked up at him—her beautiful eyes filled with tears.

"If you do not help me in my great need," she cried, "I am indeed undone. I thought Heaven had sent you to my assistance. Oh, Mr. Drummond, think! What would your feelings be if some one you loved were placed in my position? Pity a despairing woman!"

John turned away and walked to the window. He was visibly affected. She rose from her chair and followed him, holding out her hands to him with a gesture that was infinitely pathetic.

"Can I do nothing to move you?" she said. "Is it useless for me to plead?"

He could bear it no longer.

"You must give me time," he said, "to make up my mind. You say the vessel is not due for

a week. Will it suit you if I give you my answer on Monday next?"

"I shall live in agony until then. But if you cannot tell me before, I have no choice but to wait."

"Now tell me what I am to do, provided I agree. I must know everything."

"All I ask of you," she answered, "is to take a letter from me to Plymouth, and deliver it yourself into the hands of the man from America. That is all. He has already pledged himself to respect the messenger I may send."

"Very well, I will think it over. I will give you my decision as I promised on Monday."

From that moment her manner changed completely. She dried her tears and seemed to put the dark past and the present danger behind her. John, however, declined the afternoon tea she offered him, on the excuse that he had some important business to transact at the office.

It was an exceedingly thoughtful young man who left the house and strode back to the town. He felt that this was the most serious question he had ever been called upon to confront in his life. To journey to a seaport town, and deliver a letter, would not at first sight strike one as being a very

perilous adventure, but the fact that the man to whom it was to be handed was the head of a dangerous secret society, put quite a different complexion upon it. He went home in a very perplexed state of mind, spent a restless evening, and a still more restless night. It was only when, of course, quite by chance, he happened to meet Miss Conyers next morning, that he brightened up at all. She received him with her usual graciousness, and they walked down the street together. On this occasion she informed him that the Countess was suffering from neuralgia, and, in consequence, was in very low spirits.

John thought he could understand, why. ' He did not, however, say so.

All through that day he turned the question over in his mind, but without coming to a decision. At one time he thought he would go, at another he felt that he would not. And so the pendulum of indecision swung backwards and forwards.

On Saturday morning, by the exercise of great diplomacy, he managed to elicit the fact that Miss Madeleine was in the habit of attending Divine worship on Sunday evenings at the Church of Saint Bartholomew, which was situated a mile or so from The Cedars. With more subtlety than he had ever

imagined he possessed, he also discovered that she would, in all probability, be present on the following Sunday. It is not a surprising fact, therefore, that when Miss Conyers entered the sacred building she found herself in a pew but a short distance removed from that in which was seated the stalwart form of Mr. Drummond. At the conclusion of the service they met in the porch and he asked permission to walk with her as far as The Cedars. To this she graciously consented, and they set off together. For some time they talked the ordinary chit chat of the day, and then an idea occurred to Drummond.

"Miss Conyers," he said, "I want you to make up my mind for me. For I cannot do so myself."

"On what subject do you stand in need of assistance?" she asked with a little laugh.

"I will tell you," he answered. "But, before I do so, I must ask you not to say anything about it to anyone."

"I will promise that with pleasure," she replied.

"Well, the fact of the matter is, I have been asked by Mrs. Ferrars to do her a somewhat signal service. I don't know that I am going too far in telling you that she is in great trouble."

"I gathered as much," said the girl, simply.

“ Well, she has asked me to try and get her out of that trouble at some risk to myself. What do you think I should do ? ”

“ Oh, Mr. Drummond,” she said, “ I don’t think you ought to ask me to decide such a question as that ! ”

“ But I *do* ask you,” he replied.

“ Then the only thing I can say is that I should be guided by my own conscience in the matter. If you feel that you can help her, and, by doing so, make her happier, I would do it. Provided, of course, you can do it honourably.”

“ Thank you,” said Drummond. “ That settles it.”

Next morning he informed the Countess that he was prepared to undertake what she asked of him.

## CHAPTER XI

FROM the moment that Madeleine Conyers made up his mind for him, John Drummond was at peace. I even venture to think that he derived a peculiar pleasure from the knowledge that she had advised him to undertake the Countess' errand. "She is the sweetest girl in all the world," he told himself, enthusiastically. "And I really believe she has some sort of liking for me. If I did not think so, her ladyship would have to look elsewhere for a messenger."

Whether, but for Miss Conyers' influence, he would have actually refused to do her errand I cannot say; the fact remains, however, that he had consented, so nothing else mattered.

On the Sunday, as I have already said, he wrote to her stating that he was prepared to help her, and on the Monday morning he made his way to The

Cedars as soon as was compatible with the fitness of things. He was immediately admitted, but on this occasion he was conducted to what had formerly been the dining-room, but which was now fulfilling the functions of a studio. He found the Countess there, standing before an easel, on which was a half finished picture—a girl's head. Drummond has never professed to be an art critic, but he was a sufficient judge of painting to know that there was considerable talent in the work before him. Directly the artist became aware of his presence, she laid down her palette and brush and came forward to greet him.

"How am I to thank you?" she said, with a little tremor in her voice. "How good you are to me."

"I gave you my promise that I would help you," John replied. "I have now come to talk the affair over with you and to receive my instructions. I must know exactly what I've got to do, otherwise I may bungle matters."

"You shall know everything," she answered. "I have carefully arranged it all. If you would not mind going down to Plymouth on Wednesday, you would be in plenty of time for the mail boat. The man in question will land and proceed to this

address. (Here she handed him a card, upon which was the name of a street and the number of a house). He is to be there exactly two hours after the vessel arrives, and will make his way to the house. Arriving there, he will proceed to a room at the end of the corridor on the second floor. The house itself is situated in the old part of the town and is a poor place—nevertheless it will suit our purpose admirably. All you will have to do will be to reach it two hours and a half after the boat is in, walk up the stairs, rap upon the door, and when you are told to enter, do so. If all goes as it should, you will find yourself confronted by a short, stout man, wearing blue glasses; he will ask your business and you will reply that you have come to see him regarding the transference of certain documents. Should he then say, "Are they in Sanscrit?" you may hand the letter over to him—but be sure not to do so unless he asks the question."

"I will remember that," Drummond replied. "And when shall I receive the letter? To reach Plymouth in time it will be necessary for me to leave by the morning train from Waterloo."

"If you will come to see me to-morrow afternoon, I will have it ready for you," she said. "And then



I shall also be able to thank you again for your great goodness to me."

"I will come," he replied, and then bade her good-bye.

He left the house not a little disappointed that he had not seen Miss Conyers. He made up for it, however, next morning when he met her in the Market Place. It struck him that there was something peculiar about the girl's manner. She seemed more reserved than usual. He could not understand the cause of it, and, for some reason or another, it frightened him.

They walked down the street together, until at last he felt emboldened to put a request to her.

"Have you ever crossed the river," he asked, "and looked at the old town from that side? You have no idea how picturesque it is."

"No, I have not seen it," she answered, with an eagerness that was in great contrast to her former reserve. "I should like to do so."

"Let us go over the bridge then." And he forthwith led her over the old stone bridge that connects the two counties. They walked along the bank for a short distance and then sat down on a bench in the shade. The old town certainly presented a picturesque appearance with the morning sun

touching up the red-tiled roofs, the dark woodwork of the wharves, and the grey tower of the old church rising above all. John was certain by this time that Madeleine was unhappy, and he wanted, if possible, to learn the reason. He could not, however, quite see his way to doing it. She solved the difficulty for him. For in her frank and impetuous way she suddenly said:—

“Mr. Drummond, I am very unhappy.”

“I am indeed sorry to hear that,” he replied. “Is there anything I can do to help you?”

“I fear not,” she answered, and then was silent for a few moments. “Mr. Drummond,” she said at last, speaking in a low voice as if she were afraid that someone might hear her, “I don’t know what to think about Mrs. Ferrars.”

“In what way?” asked John. . .

She shook her head.

“I cannot tell you,” she answered. “I only know that there are times when she frightens me.”

“You don’t mean that she is unkind to you?” he asked, anxiously.

“No, no, I don’t mean that. And perhaps I ought not to have spoken about it at all, but I felt troubled.”

Scarcely knowing what he was doing, he placed his hand upon her arm.

"I hope that you will always tell me your troubles," he said, with great earnestness.

Another silence ensued.

"You are very kind to me," she said at last. "And it seems silly of me to have mentioned the matter, but I could not help it."

There was another silence, and, while it lasted, John debated a question with himself. At last he made up his mind.

"Madeleine," he said, "I am going to ask you to do something for me."

"What is it?" she enquired; apparently not noticing the way in which he had addressed her.

"I want you to let me take you to see my mother. It is not ten minutes' walk from here. Believe me, I have good reason for asking this."

"Let us go then," she said.

And they walked together along the bank until they reached the house.

They found Mrs. Drummond seated in her favourite place. She looked up from her reading in surprise. Who was this tall, handsome girl her son was escorting across the lawn? Surely John had not—

Whatever wild ideas the lady may have had were interrupted by the introduction which followed. A chair was procured, and Madeleine occupied it for upwards of a quarter of an hour. During that time it was easy to see that she made an impression upon John's mother, which vastly delighted that young man. When she had taken leave of her, and they were in the road once more, she informed that gentleman that his mother was one of the sweetest old ladies she had ever met. And then his cup was full.

"Now," he said, "do you know why I took you to see her?"

The girl had to confess that she did not.

"Before I tell you, I want you to give me your promise that you will do what I am going to ask you."

"Won't you tell me first what it is?" she replied. "But I will promise this, that if it is anything in reason, I will try to do it."

"It is not very much," he answered, "but it means a good deal to me. I am going away to-morrow morning and scarcely know when I shall be back. What I want you to do is to promise me that, should anything chance to occur while I am away, you will at once go to my mother."

"But what could occur?" she asked, in some bewilderment.

"I don't know that anything will happen," he replied. "But I like to provide for contingencies. Will you promise me?"

"If you wish it," she answered, simply. And on hearing that John's heart leapt within him.

He bade her good-bye at the corner of the High Street, and, if the old maiden lady, who keeps the small bookseller's shop outside which they stood, thought that he held her hand longer than was altogether necessary, that was her affair, not mine.

That afternoon Drummond made his way to The Cedars, and received from the Countess the letter he was to convey to Plymouth. He found her in a very agitated condition. He attributed this to nervousness. It was scarcely likely that a woman whose very existence perhaps depended on his efforts would be anything but nervous. She thanked him again and again for his goodness to her, and vowed that, so long as she might live, she would be grateful to him.

"By the way," she said, as he rose to go. "I think it would be better if, after delivering the letter, you were to take the train into Cornwall and remain there for two or three days. It is just

possible that, in spite of the promise given, the man may follow you."

This was a side of the affair which had not struck him, and John did not altogether care about it. However, he saw the reason contained in the suggestion, and was prepared to do as she wished. Then she produced the all-important letter. It was unaddressed, but sealed.

"I implore you to be careful of it," she said, as she handed it to him. "My life depends on its not passing out of your possession until it reaches the person for whom it is intended."

"I will guard it with my life," he replied, placing it in the inside pocket of his coat as he spoke. "I only trust that the result may be all you hope."

He bade her good-bye and left the house. He was bitterly disappointed at not having seen Madcleine, but he knew that it would be a bad move to ask for her. The usual maid-servant escorted him to the gate and held it open for him. Before passing through, he turned back and looked up at the house. Then an exclamation of astonishment escaped him. You, my reader, will understand this when I say that, looking out of one of the windows at the further end, was no less a person than Mr. Perkins.

It was a very puzzled John Drummond who walked down that dreary thoroughfare.

Next morning he left Waterloo at nine and reached Plymouth shortly before four o'clock. It was the first time he had visited that ancient seaport, but its traditions were well known to him. Having engaged a room at one of the best hotels, he took a stroll upon the famous Hoe, admired the heights of Batten, the wooded picturesqueness of Mount Edgecumbe, and the variety of shipping in the Sound.

As he looked upon the placid waters he could scarcely believe that he, the quiet, almost unknown, House and Estate Agent of a small riverside town, was visiting this place to meet one of the greatest conspirators of Europe. It seemed impossible! Then his thoughts turned to Madeleine. He wondered what she was doing. He hoped that she might find time to think of him. Later he made his way back to his hotel, dined, went for a stroll afterwards, and then to bed, wondering what would happen on the morrow.

Next morning he was early astir. He went out upon the Hoe and searched the horizon for the vessel, whose coming he was so eagerly awaiting. So far, however, there was no sign of it. It was

not until nearly breakfast time that the great steamer turned the point and steamed majestically into the Sound. As John Drummond looked at her, he wondered what effect she was destined to bear upon his life. He watched her draw up behind the breakwater and drop her anchor.

"In a little more than two hours' time I shall have completed my mission, and after that I never want to see or hear of the Countess Londa again."

There was someone else, however, who he desired very much to see—and if he thought of her more perhaps than you or I would have done—well, who shall blame him?

Sitting on the Hoe, he watched the tender go out and saw it draw alongside. He took the time carefully, and then returned to his hotel for breakfast. It was not, however, an altogether satisfactory meal. Early though he had risen, and bracing as the air had been, he discovered that his appetite had quite deserted him. He glanced at some fish, trifled with an omelette, and quailed before grilled ham. At last he had to admit to himself that he was too nervous to eat. He wanted to get the interview over and be done with it. Until then he was certain that he would know no peace. Again and again he consulted his watch,



fearing lest he might be late for his appointment. The time seemed to him to drag as it had never done before. The morning paper possessed no interest for him—atrocities in Asia Minor and simmering rebellion in China were as dust in his nostrils.

At last he felt that it was time to go. He accordingly donned his hat and started off. Eventually he found himself in the lower quarter of the town, in close proximity to the place where the Pilgrim Fathers had set out to colonise the continent of America. The houses thereabout were by no means luxurious. There were shops in which chronometers and compasses filled the window; others in which oil-skins and sea-boots; with slop clothes of infinite variety catered for the mariner, both at sea and ashore. Over all was the one pervading smell of fish—a subtle perfume from which there was no escape. He passed numerous carved doorways, reminiscent of the days of Raleigh and Drake until, at last, he reached the house which had been so much on his mind. The prospect was not at all prepossessing. He found himself standing in a narrow and particularly dirty street, flanked by houses, all some three stories in height. The lowest dens in London could scarcely

have equalled them for filth, and their only saving grace was the carving upon the outer door.

John Drummond passed into the stone-paved courtyard and looked about him. On the right a narrow stone staircase, with a rope in lieu of a handrail, led up to the second storey. He ascended. No one stopped him, and the only person he encountered was a small child, seated on the top step, playing with a mouse in a trap, who refused to let him pass her until he had examined her prize. When he gave her a shilling and she had retreated downstairs, scarcely able to realise her good fortune, he proceeded along the grimy corridor and approached the door at the end. A dirtier place he had never seen. In all probability it had not been painted or washed since the days of the heroes already mentioned. The walls were gloriously panelled, the lintels were carved after a fashion that we do not know nowadays—but John Drummond paid no attention to them. He was thinking of the interview that was before him. After again examining his watch he rapped upon the door. A deep voice from within called out "Come in," and, turning the handle, he entered.

The room was a small one, and as badly furnished as the rest of the house. The paper, in

most places, had fallen from the walls, the panes of the windows were, in most cases, cracked, and the sashes rotten to a degree. There was no carpet upon the floor, and the furniture consisted of a rough table in the centre of the room, three or four dilapidated chairs, and a looking-glass that had certainly seen better days. In one of the chairs, which might once have been of the armed species, an exceedingly stout gentleman was seated. He wore blue spectacles, and his face wore an expression of great anxiety.

"What do you want with me?" he asked of Drummond.

"I have come to see you concerning the transference of certain documents," that gentleman replied.

"Documents?" asked the other, looking sharply at him. And then, after a short pause, he added, "Do they happen to be in Sanscrit?"

"You can judge for yourself," John replied, and he thereupon handed him the letter. "I know nothing of what is in it."

The man broke the seal and withdrew the contents of the envelope.

I regret to say that an oath escaped him. He banged his fist upon the table. Drummond was

moving towards the door, but the other called him back.

"I have passed my word," he said, "that I would not detain you, or hand you over to the police, but I tell you this, my friend. Once you're out of my sight, I'll do my level best to get you and your friends fifteen years apiece for this bit of business."

John stared at him in amazement. What on earth did the man mean? If the Countess' story were correct, the boot was on the other foot.

"I tell you I know nothing at all of what is in that letter," he said. "I simply undertook to deliver it on behalf of a client."

"In that case you must have a nice selection of clients," retorted the man of the blue glasses. "But you don't expect me to believe that, I suppose?"

"I give you my word," replied John, hotly. "I am not accustomed to being doubted." And then, almost before he knew it, he had blurted out, "If you're the leader of this secret society——"

"Leader of what?" cried the other, springing to his feet.

"Leader of the secret society which has been oppressing the Countess Londa," John replied with corresponding warmth.

"The Countess Londa? I never heard of her. And as for a secret society, let me tell you that I am a member of the New York Stock Exchange."

Drummond was too much bewildered to know what to think. One thing was certain, if the man were playing a part, he must be a consummate actor.

"Look here," said the latter, "I am going to say something to you. I'm a fairly good judge of faces, and I must say you do not strike me as being the kind of man to be mixed up in a business of this sort. You talk a lot of nonsense about Countesses and secret societies. I know neither the one nor the other."

"But I was told that you were the chief?"

"Now, listen to me, my friend," said the other. "I don't know whether you're a fool or a knave—but——"

"I didn't come here to be insulted," growled Drummond. "I simply came to deliver that letter. Having done it, I will bid you good morning. I wish to goodness I had never undertaken the business at all!"

"You'll certainly wish that before you're done," remarked the stranger, "and you'll go on wishing

it for a good many years. Folk of your profession may have a merry life—but it's certainly a short one. If you think we're going to pay two million dollars for the body, well, you're mistaken."

"For the body? What on earth do you mean?" cried John. "I know of no body!"

The eyes behind the blue spectacles regarded him steadfastly.

"Either you are the cleverest scoundrel," he said, "that I've met in a fairly long experience, or you've been weak enough to have allowed yourself to be made the tool of a gang of rogues."

"A gang of rogues?"

"Do you mean to tell me that you have no idea what is in this letter?" asked the man, holding up the sheet of note-paper as he spoke.

"I give you my word that, all I know is, that it contained an offer to return to you the papers, which the Countess Londa took with her when she fled from Poland. I understand that you have been searching for her in America?"

• "Man, man, you have been fooled, and I can see it all. Read that!"

As he spoke he threw the letter across the table. But John did not pick it up.

"No, thank you," he said. "I have no desire to read it."

"You had better if you want to know more than you do now."

A terrible feeling that he had been deceived was creeping over him. All his old distrust of the Countess was rising again. He looked at the letter on the table, and then at the man before him.

"Read it," said the latter. "I should advise you to do so. Upon my word I believe you to be an honest man."

Without another word John picked up the letter. It ran as follows —

"If you are anxious to know the whereabouts of Silas J. Webber, you can do so by inserting an advertisement in the *Times* to the effect that you are willing to pay the sum of two million dollars. After that, further negotiations will be opened with you."

John stared at the paper as if he were hypnotised. He could not believe that he saw aright. If this letter were correct, and he could not doubt it, then

the story that had been told him by the Countess was simply a tissue of lies. For a moment he felt sick and giddy—he thought of his mother and of Madeleine Conyers. What would they think of him? And all the time the man in the blue glasses was steadily watching him.

"Well," said that individual at last, "what do you think of it?"

"God knows," he answered. "I don't know what to say or do. Is it possible that there can be such villainy? She told me such a pathetic tale, and, like the fool I was, I believed her."

"There was a lady in the case then?"

"The Countess Londa—of whom I spoke just now."

"The Countess Bunkum, I expect," said the other. "It seems to me we are on the threshold of big things. The question is, how do you propose to act?"

"I don't know what to do," groaned poor John. "It's plain I've been fooled from beginning to end. But I never suspected such treachery as this. Tell me who you are and how you come to be mixed up in it?"

Thereupon Vandergraff set to work and told



him everything. He gave an outline of the career of Silas Webber and of the business which had brought him to Europe. He described the anxiety of the widow and son, and commented briefly on the intense excitement in America concerning the fate of the missing man.

Then John told his tale, hiding nothing.

"I quite understand," said the man with the blue glasses. "It's our turn now. Given a little luck, we'll catch the whole gang. What we have to do is to get up to Town as quickly as possible and take Scotland Yard into our confidence. It will be strange if we can't score off them after all."

They left the house together and made their way to the railway station.

For many reasons it was a pity they did not see Mr. Perkins, who, for the last hour, had been watching the house from a tavern on the opposite side of the street. He followed them to the railway station and saw them enter the London express.

"The game's up," he muttered, as the train steamed out of the station. "The prettiest bit of business that was ever planned has been spoilt by trusting to an outsider."

The same evening he slipped aboard a vessel bound for South America, and that was the last I could ascertain of the doings of Mr. Perkins.

## CHAPTER XII

IT would be impossible to give any adequate idea of John Drummond's feeling during that journey to London. He could scarcely believe that he had been so cruelly and heartlessly tricked by the Countess. He had gone out of his way to help her in what he had understood was her time of trouble, and she in return had rewarded him by an act of the grossest treachery. When he thought of what his own fate might have been, had not Mr. Vandergraff believed in him, he felt his blood run cold in his veins. How easily he might have been taken for an accomplice. The fact that he was assisting in the great Silas Webber drama scarcely appealed to him at the time. He was too angry to pay much heed to that.

On reaching Paddington they took a hansom and drove direct to Scotland Yard. There John told

his tale as straightforwardly as he knew how, keeping nothing back.

"You've had a narrow escape, Mr. Drummond," said the inspector, when he had finished. Had they succeeded in their attempt, you might have found yourself in a very unenviable position. As it is, your evidence will be of the utmost value to us. I presume no one knows of your return to London?"

"Not that I am aware of," John replied. "I don't see how they could."

"Let us trust they are not," said the other. "We must lay our hands on them with as little delay as possible. If they suspect that there is anything wrong, they'll be off before we know what they're doing, and the chase will be a long one. By the way, while we're on the subject, there are a few photographs you might look over. From the description you have given me of the lady, I fancy it is just possible we may know something of her and her antecedents."

He left the room and presently returned, bringing with him a large packet of photographs.

"Cast your eye over these, will you, Mr. Drummond," he said; "while I am arranging matters, and tell me if you recognise any of them."

John did as requested. Most of the pictures had been taken on the Continent, and represented people of all sorts and descriptions; military-looking men, debonaire ladies, young girls who might just have emerged from a convent, patriarchal grey beards and grandmotherly women, were all depicted there, and every one was a criminal. Drummond, however, could not find anyone he knew among them. A second packet was therefore brought him, and again he began his search. He had scrutinised perhaps thirty, when an exclamation of astonishment escaped him. The picture in his hand was that of the Countess Londa, and the address of the firm showed that it had been taken in New York. On hearing his utterance of surprise, the inspector looked up.

"Have you found anything of interest?" he asked, leaving his chair and coming round to John's side.

"Here is the woman herself," John answered. "You could not have a better likeness."

The inspector looked over his shoulder. Then he, too, appeared to be surprised.

"Well, I might have thought of that," he said at last. "But I had no idea she was in England."

The last time we heard of her she was in New York."

"You know her then?"

"Know her?" repeated the other. "Good gracious, I should think I did! She is one of the most accomplished women of her kind alive to-day. I don't know another like her. And this is about the biggest thing she has ever attempted—which, as you may suppose, is saying a good deal."

"May I look at that photo?" put in Vandergraff. "You can understand how interested I am."

The photograph was handed to him and he examined it carefully with the aid of his glass.

"Sakes alive," he said at once, "this is Saidie Dexter, who ruined young Palgrave, and would have done the same for James W. Walbrooke's son if the family hadn't got him away in time. And to think she should have played it on poor old Silas like this! Well! Well! I wonder what he would have said could he have known it?"

"Saidie Dexter," said the inspector, scratching his chin reflectively, Margaret Belton, Dora Mitford, Paula Wexford, Lady Millicent Durfield, Mrs. Marion Ferrars, and the Countess Londa. Given

time, she'd furnish a whole directory with names."

Vandergraff laughed.

"It is more probable that the directory furnishes her," he remarked.

John, however, said nothing; he was thinking of something, and that something took a lot of understanding.

"Did you say that she once passed as a Mrs. Dexter?" he put in at last, looking up at the inspector as he spoke.

"Yes," that gentleman replied, with the deliberation of one accustomed to such matters. "She committed, or rather planned, several big frauds in Chicago under that name. Her husband, at any rate her reputed husband, had once served in the American Army. He afterwards did three years for a long firm swindle.

"Can you describe him?" asked Drummond. "Believe me, I have a very good reason for putting the question to you."

"I don't know that I can," replied the inspector; "but I have a man here who, I believe, can do so."

He spoke through his desk tube, and a few moments later a tall, soldierly-looking man entered the room.

"Middlewick," said the inspector, "I believe you were in America at the time that Saidie Dexter committed those frauds in Chicago. You had something to do with her husband, had you not?"

"Yes, sir," the man replied. "I had him under observation over those Briton forgeries, but they'd worked it so cleverly that we couldn't bring it home to him. I should know him again if I saw him anywhere."

"Of medium height," said John, turning to the man, "grey hair, fierce grey moustache, wears his hat a bit on one side, and limps a little on his left foot?"

"You have described him exactly, sir," replied the other. "He was thrown off a car for gambling near San Diego, and he broke his ankle and his collar bone over the job. Otherwise he'd have been with her in Chicago and we'd have had him. Then there was another of the gang, a man named Pete Hawkins. They were always together, and they played into each other's hands something marvellous. A clever couple if ever I saw one."

What made John think of it, he cannot tell to this day, but the fact remains that he felt sure he was acquainted with the redoubtable Pete.

"Tall, black hair and eyes," he cried. "Clean



shaven top lip, curly black beard. Looks about forty-five, and has a solemn manner. Is that your man?"

"You've hit him off exactly," the other answered. "Though I must say I don't think he had a beard when I knew him. Might I ask where you met him, sir?"

Before answering Drummond looked at the inspector. That gentleman nodded approval, whereupon he described the circumstances under which he had made the other's acquaintance. It would have served all their purposes better had he been able to say that Mr. Pete Hawkins—alias James Perkins—had followed him to Plymouth, and had given the alarm to the occupants of The Cedars—whom they were so anxious to catch.

At last all the arrangements were complete, and the party, consisting of the inspector, two detectives, Vandergraff and Drummond, was on its way to the riverside town which has played such an important part in my story. If I were to tell you that John Drummond was happy, I should be misleading you most grossly. As a matter of fact, a more miserable man it would have been difficult to discover. He was thoroughly out of joint with himself and the world in general. Badly though

she had treated him, he scarcely knew how he should look the woman, whom he had once called the Countess, in the face, when they should meet. She had deceived him, it was true, but he had no desire to be too hard on her. After all, she was a woman, and a very beautiful one too. This, perhaps, counted for something. Even in a career of crime there may be some extenuating circumstances.

Reaching the town, they left the train and drove straight to the Police Station. Five minutes there were sufficient to make all the necessary arrangements, and then they set off for the house. It was nearly nine o'clock by this time and quite dark—a circumstance for which Drummond was supremely thankful. They passed through the Market Place, turned to the right, and began to ascend the hill which leads to the Wellesley Road. By this time John had quite made up his mind on one matter. Whatever might befall the woman whom he had known as the Countess, Madeleine Conyers was innocent and must leave the house. He would take her to his mother that very night. He could not bear the thought of her remaining in the house.

At last the local inspector made a signal, and the cab drew up some fifty yards from the gates of

The Cedars. They alighted, and a brief conference was held.

"It would be as well if you went first and rang the bell, Mr. Drummond," said the man from Scotland Yard. "We will follow close behind you."

Little though the prospect appealed to him, John consented to the plan and went on in front to the gate. Reaching it, he rang the bell, and, as he did so, thought of the previous occasions on which he had done the same thing. How little he had dreamed then that it would be his fate to one day do so with the minions of the law upon his heels.

As no answer rewarded him, he rang again. Then the sound of a woman's step greeted him, and a moment later the door swung open and he found himself face to face with the prim maid-servant who had admitted him on other and happier occasions. She seemed vastly surprised to see him at such an hour, but of course was too well trained to say so. He enquired for Mrs. Ferrars, and as he did so, heard the police officers come up behind him.

"Mrs. Ferrars is not at home, sir," the woman replied. "She went to London this morning. Miss Conyers is in, sir, if you would like to see her."

"She's slipped us after all," cried the gentleman from Scotland Yard. Then, turning to the local officer, he said, "Benson, take the cab and go to the lodgings of Mr. Dexter—arrest him and take him to the station. I'll come down and search the house later. Wire to Town to them to look out for the woman. They will understand. Don't lose any time."

The officer departed on his errand, after which the others entered the grounds. They had not advanced very far when Drummond stopped the man from Scotland Yard.

"Look here," he said; "I'm going to ask you to do me a favour."

"I shall be very glad to do so," replied the other; "provided, of course, that it does not affect my duty. What is it?"

"It concerns the lady we are about to see—Miss Conyers," John answered. "I pledge you my word she knows nothing of this business. She was engaged by the other woman solely as a companion, on the day that she entered into possession of this house. If you have nothing to say to the contrary, I thought of getting her to my mother's house to-night. This is no place for a young and innocent girl."

"I'm inclined to agree with you on that point," said the other with a peculiar smile. "Well, I'll see what can be done. I only wish we could have laid our hands upon the woman herself. If you ask my opinion, you were followed to Plymouth and shadowed while there. You were seen in company with this gentleman, Mr. Vandergraff, and when you took the train for London, information was wired to them, and her ladyship, to put it vulgarly, cleared out immediately."

As is already known, this is exactly what had happened.

A moment later they entered the house and were shown direct to the drawing-room. Madeleine was not there, but she soon made her appearance. That she was surprised to see them admitted of no doubt. She looked from one to the other as if she could not understand the situation. John went to meet her, and instinctively took her hand.

"Miss Conyers," he said, "I am very much afraid that we are here to cause you pain. Will you try to be brave?"

"What is it you have to tell me?" the girl answered with a face that had suddenly become very white. "I have felt all day that something was wrong. Please do not keep me in suspense."

"At what time this morning did Mrs. Ferrars leave?" asked the man from Scotland Yard. "Can you fix the time exactly? It is essential that we should know it."

Madeleine paused to think before she replied.

"It was a few minutes before twelve o'clock," she answered. "I am sure of that. A telegram came for her, and she opened it in the hall."

"Did she say anything when she had read it?" the man asked.

"I understood that it was from her old companion who has been so ill," the girl replied. "She told me that it was necessary for her to go to Town at once, and that she did not know quite when she would be back. She seemed very much upset, and cried bitterly while I helped her with her trunk. There is nothing the matter, is there? If so, please tell me at once. She has not met with an accident?"

John glanced at the inspector. The latter nodded as if in approval.

• "Miss Conyers," said John, "as I said just now, we have bad news for you. I am sorry to tell you that we have all been very badly tricked."

"In what way?" she asked, unable to understand

what he meant. "Surely not by Mrs. Ferrars? I cannot believe that!"

"Unfortunately it is only too true," was the reply. "The fact is she is not the lady we thought her, but a notorious criminal, and this gentleman, who is an officer from Scotland Yard, holds a warrant for her arrest."

Madeleine uttered a little exclamation of pain. It was evident from it that she had been as badly taken in as John. Some moments elapsed before she replied.

"Oh! This cannot be true," she cried, and then added, "she was so good to me—so kind and considerate."

John felt inclined to differ with her on this point, but he did not do so.

The inspector thereupon stepped into the breach. Experience had doubtless hardened him.

"I'm afraid we're rather wasting time, sir," he said. "If you don't mind, we'll search the house while you're explaining matters to the young lady. We may find something that may give us a clue, both as to her whereabouts and also as to the other matter that we are acquainted with."

John understood what he meant, and was grateful to him for the consideration he had shown in

not mentioning what that other matter was. Nothing was to be gained by it.

"Before we do anything further, however," the inspector continued, producing his pocket-book as he spoke, "perhaps Miss Conyers would not mind telling me how many servants there are in the house. I may have to question them as to what they know about this matter."

"There are five," she answered. "A butler——"

"Butler?" cried Drummond in astonishment. "But since Mrs. Ferrars has occupied the house, a maid has always opened the door to me, and, when I lunched here, she waited at table."

"Exactly!" answered Madeline. "Mrs. Ferrars told me when I came that, whenever she had visitors, she preferred to be waited on by a maid. The man only did so when we were alone."

The inspector smiled grimly.

"There is more in that than meets the eye," he said. "She did not want the man to be seen."

"Good Heavens, now I can see everything," cried John, slapping his hand on his knee. "The butler was the man whom I told you I saw talking to Dexter, and whom I afterwards caught looking out of one of these windows."



Then, turning to Madeleine as if for information, he added:—

“A dark man with a clean shaven upper lip, and a black beard?”

“You have described him exactly,” the girl replied. “He left yesterday morning to go to see a sick relation somewhere in the Midlands.”

Again the man from Scotland Yard gave one of his inscrutable smiles.

“If I may hazard a guess,” he remarked, turning to Drummond, “he left here in order to follow you. But pray forgive me, Miss Conyers, I am interrupting you. Who are the other servants?”

“Two maids, one elderly and one young,” she returned. “But you can see them for yourself, for both of them are in the house now. Then there was the Chef—a Frenchman—who had been with Mrs. Ferrars, so I understand, for many years.”

“But you use the word ‘was’! What am I to understand from that?” the inspector asked.

“I say ‘was’ because he has behaved infamously. Within an hour of Mrs. Ferrars’ departure he packed his box and went away, declaring that he would not remain any longer in such a dull place. I did not know what on earth to do, as I was powerless to stop him, and he absolutely refused

to give me any address, so that Mrs. Ferrars might communicate with him."

"From his point of view, a very prudent action," replied the police officer. "That's another of the gang. Perhaps you will be good enough to describe him to me."

The girl did so to the best of her ability, and the other entered the particulars in his pocket-book, after which he enquired whether there were any more servants.

"Only one, the kitchen-maid," said Madeleine. "You can see her, for she is still here. She is quite a young girl, and I obtained her from the country myself."

"Thank you. And now I think I will take a look round if you have no objection. Perhaps you would not mind telling one of the maids to furnish me with a candle."

John rang the bell, and, when it was answered by the prim maid who had opened the door to them on their arrival, the necessary order was given. As soon as it was fulfilled, the officers, accompanied by Vandergraff, set off to explore the house.

When they had departed, a somewhat awkward silence fell upon the pair who remained in the room. During his journey up from Plymouth, John

had made up his mind on a certain matter, but now that he found himself brought face to face, not only with it, but with her, he discovered that it was more difficult to put it into execution than he had supposed. The girl, he had every reason to know, had been placed in a most serious position, and very naturally he did not wish to add to it. Yet, if he did not ask the question he had intended to put to her, how could he take her away to his mother's house? She was the first to break the silence.

"Mr. Drummond," she said, "this is really very terrible. If I had had any idea that Mrs. Ferrars was what you say she is, I should not have dreamed of coming to her. I have told you, I think, that my father and mother are dead, and really I have scarcely a friend in the world. What on earth am I to do? This will ruin me."

"Not a bit of it," John replied, brusquely. "No one will suspect you of any complicity in the matter."

Then, advancing a step, he took her hand and looked into her eyes.

"Madelaine," he said, and there was a little tremor in his voice, "under other circumstances I should certainly not have spoken so soon, but

situated as we are, I see no way out of it." (He could feel her hand trembling in his). "You must know by this time that I love you—that I love you beyond anything in the world. I have only known you a short time—but love may be born in an hour, nay, in a moment. You are in trouble, let me help you. Leave this house to-night and let me take you to my mother, who will befriend you as she would her own daughter. Dearest, will you be my wife? I know I am not worthy of you, but if you will take me, I will do my utmost to make you happy. Tell me, dear, whether you can love me, as I love you? But if you would rather not answer such a question—say so, and I will not press it."

She did not speak, but she gave him her other hand, and then her head fell upon his shoulder and remained there. She sobbed as if her heart would break. He endeavoured to soothe her, but it was some time before he could do so. When she was herself again, she looked up at him with sweet trusting eyes—that had the real sparkle of love in them. He read their meaning, and who shall blame him if he sealed his fate with a—well, shall we say *in the way it should be sealed?*

"Oh, John, John," she whispered. "I cannot believe it. I cannot understand why you should

care for me. But oh! I love you! I love you! I think I have loved you ever since I first saw you."

John Drummond was not, as you may have gathered by this time, a man given to a great display of emotion, but now, with this lovely girl in his arms, telling him that she loved him, he found a lump rising in his throat and tears standing in his eyes. Happen what might, he would prove worthy of her love.

"Now, dear," he said at last, and you may guess how sweet the knowledge of proprietorship was to him, "you must get some things together for I am going to take you home to my mother. This house, after what has happened in it, is no place for you."

"But will your mother want me, do you think?" she asked, looking up at him.

"You have seen her, and you know that she will," said John. "Believe me, dear, she will be a second mother to you."

"Then I will go and get ready at once. Oh! John, you don't know how miserable, and yet how happy I am. I am not worthy of you, but, God helping me, I will do my best to make you the best wife in the world."

"I am sure of that," he answered, and you may be sure he meant it.

Then he opened the door for her, and she went upstairs to her own room, while John set off in search of the man from Scotland Yard. He eventually discovered him in the kitchen, where he was interrogating the servants. Small success, however, attended his efforts. It was evident that they knew nothing of their late mistress' history, and also that they fully believed the stories that had been told them by the artful Perkins, and still more artful chef. To add to the inspector's troubles he had searched the house from garret to kitchen and had discovered no clue to guide him.

"I've been through every room in the house and can find nothing," he said. "She hasn't left a scrap of anything that will give me the hint I want. It's very evident that she had everything ready to clear out on the first warning. Oh, she's a knowing one, is, your friend the—what was it? Yes! I remember, the Countess Londa."

John was not in the humour for jesting, and for that reason he did not reply to this speech. Even had he done so it is probable it would not have been heard, and for the reason that at the same moment the gate-bell rang loudly.

"Who is that, I wonder?" cried the inspector,

jumping to his feet. One of you girls go and find out, and be sure to keep a silent tongue in your head—or you'll hear from me."

A few moments later the maid returned, bringing with her the local police officer, who had been sent to arrest Dexter.

"Well, did you catch him?" cried the man from Scotland Yard.

The other shook his head.

"He cleared out at mid-day, so his landlady told me. The excuse he made was that he had received an invitation to shoot somewhere in Oxfordshire. I searched his rooms, but there was nothing there. He'd taken everything he possessed away with him."

"Pretty good for a shooting excursion," said the inspector. "Perhaps he's going to the centre of Africa in search of elephants. At any rate, I'll have a look round there myself in the morning."

"What are you going to do now?" enquired John, who was wondering how long it would be before Madeleine would be ready.

"I'm going to search the cellars," the other replied. Then, turning to the maids, he added, "just bring me the keys."

"We have not got them, sir," the elder of the women replied. "Mrs. Ferrars locked them up, saying that the cellars were dark and were not to be used."

"Has the other lady, her companion, got them, do you think? Just go and ask her."

The maid went off on her errand, and presently returned with the information that Miss Conyers had never had possession of the keys.

There was a smile of satisfaction on the inspector's face.

"In that case I'm afraid we must break the door open," he remarked. "I fancy we shall find what we are seeking there. It will certainly surprise me if we don't. Come along."

He thereupon led the way down the stone stairs from the lobby, outside the kitchen, and at the bottom of some half-dozen steps reached the cellar door. Turning to the constable behind him, he bade him break it in. The man put his shoulder to it—but without success. The door was a strong one and defied him.

"Let me try," said John, and he accordingly applied his strength to it—with the same result. Then the pair tried together, but were no more



successful. At last the local police officer departed in search of an instrument wherewith to force it, and returned in a few minutes with a crowbar in his hand. In almost less time than it takes to tell, the lock was forced and the door stood open.

With the inspector at their head, they descended the damp stone stairs, until they found themselves in a narrow passage, on either side of which was a door. That on the left was unlocked, and when opened, showed them that they were face to face with the wine cellar. The racks and bins, however, were empty, while the floor was covered with a litter of straw and empty envelopes.

"Nothing there," said the inspector, after a brief survey of the place. "We'll try the cellar on the other side."

They crossed to the door in question, only to find it locked.

"Break it in," said the man from Scotland Yard, and forthwith the crowbar was again brought into action. The door fell in with a crash at the third blow, and then a curious sight met their eyes. The room, if room it could be called, was a small one, perhaps ten feet long by six feet in width. It possessed one small window—a narrow slit, some

few inches in length. But there was that before them which, for the moment, held everyone spell-bound. In the centre of the room, supported on two trestles, was a coffin.

"It seems to me we have found what we were looking for," remarked the inspector, in a quiet voice, but with unmistakable satisfaction. No one else said anything, for the simple reason that it seemed as if there were nothing else to be said.

"Very well," said the inspector, after he had walked round the dismal object and had inspected it from every point of view, "we'll have to see to this in the morning."

Then, turning to the local officer, he bade him place a man on guard at the door at the top of the stairs for the remainder of the night. After that they went upstairs. The incandescent lights were turned down, and, in consequence, the hall was in half darkness. Long shadows drew across the tessellated floor and added to the general gloom.

"Well," said the inspector, wiping the perspiration from his brow as he spoke, "I've known some queer cases in my time—but I think this beats them all."

John was about to reply, when his quick ears caught the sound of a light footstep descending the stairs. A moment later Madeleine made her appearance.

"I have only one trunk," she said. "But I am afraid I cannot move it myself."

The inspector was quite equal to the occasion. Two constables were at once despatched, and in a very few minutes the article in question was beside the driver of the cab that still waited at the gate. Then John Drummond turned to Vandergraff.

"Mr. Vandergraff," he said, "we've been through a good deal since we met this morning. Won't you let me offer you the hospitality of my house for the night? We can talk over this matter in the morning."

Vandergraff accepted the invitation with alacrity, and then John proposed that they should start.

"If you want me for anything," said John, holding out his hand to the inspector, "you know where to find me."

"I shall know where to find you, never fear," replied the officer, with a laugh. "I don't fancy, however, that we shall trouble you very much for

a few days. Now that I've settled matters here, I'm going to overhaul Mr. Dexter's late residence. I'm afraid though, it won't tell us much. Good-night."

Half an hour later they had reached John's house, where Madeline was received with a welcome, the sincerity of which was unmistakable.

The sun was within half an hour of rising when Vandergraff and Drummond sought their couches. By that time John knew more about Silas Webber's life and character than he did before. On the following morning Vandergraff departed for London.

\* \* \* \* \*

"It was all your fault," said a certain lady in South America, as she leaned back in her chair in a shady *patio* and fanned herself slowly. "If you had only worked matters as you should have done, all would have been right. As it is, we have dropped everything. We have only lost a couple of millions—and through your folly."

"I can't see what I have done," her companion

remarked, as he rolled a cigarette. "I did all you told me. In my opinion you trusted that idiot of a House Agent too much, but I suppose that does not go for anything with a woman."

To this she offered no reply. It was noticeable, however, that her fingers—those fingers which so many admired, were tightly clenched upon the elbow of the chair.

"And what are we to do now?"

As he spoke she rose from her chair and faced him like a lioness at bay.

"You can say or do whatever you like," she said, "but my mind is made up. I am tired of it all. The misery and the mockery of it—" and then her voice broke with a little sob. "I wish to goodness I were dead!"

Surely there must have been some good somewhere.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was trouble! There was very big trouble! What was to be done? At length, however, matters were settled, as they would have

been at any other time, and Silas Webber went back to his own country—as unostentatiously as he had come.

For my own part, I wish I had been present at the wedding of John Drummond and Madeleine Conyers. It was my misfortune that I was not. But then, of course, I have been unfortunate in everything. As a matter of fact, I don't think that any fault can be found in the way in which Fate has behaved. I am, unfortunately, still a bachelor, but—you will hear more about that later on. Should you happen to hear that the Countess Londa, alias Mrs. Ferrars, Saidie Dexter, Margaret Belton, Dora Mitford, Paula Wexford, Lady Millicent Durfield, was arrested some six months ago for attempting to sell certain Russian plans, you must not believe the fact. It was old Israel Graff Nitz who told me that "it was a great world, but the weakest might sometimes be taken for the strongest."

I have just bought a silver mug, which I am going to take down with me next week to a certain christening. As a matter of fact, I am rather ashamed of myself, for I feel that I do not deserve the honour that has been conferred upon me.

256 THE COUNTESS LONDA

That, of course, however, has nothing to do with  
you When we catch the Countess Londa I will  
tell you more about it

THE END

OCTOBER, 1902

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